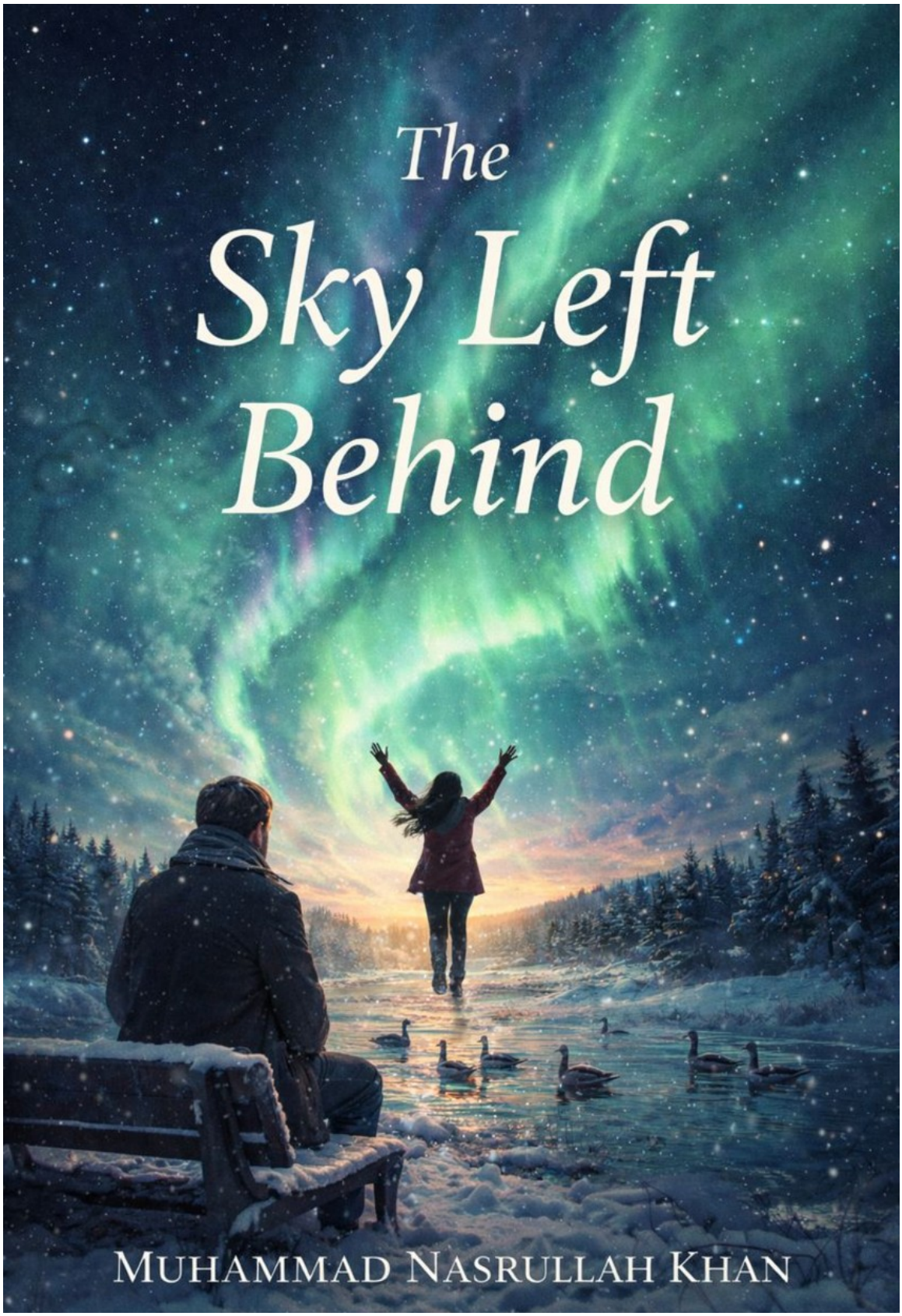
The
Sky Left
Behind
MUHAMMAD NASRULLAH KHAN

THE SKY LEFT BEHIND

A Novel of Love, Exile, and the Spaces Between

by

Muhammad Nasrullah Khan

A lyrical, philosophical novel about exile, love, and the invisible burdens of belonging to more than one place—and fully to none.

Set against the frozen rivers, endless winters, and luminous silences of Canada, The Sky Left Behind follows Ali, a writer and immigrant whose life is measured not only by visas, classrooms, and precarious contracts, but by memory, longing, and moral responsibility. Haunted by the pull of the homeland he left behind, Ali navigates love, desire, and the unspoken hierarchies of a new country, where generosity is polite but never enough to fill the emptiness of dislocation.

Alongside him is Mika, a young Indigenous woman carrying the weight of twelve thousand years of history, memory, and unresolved trauma. Their paths converge in a landscape that is at once real and uncanny, where geese trace the rivers, northern lights shimmer like ancestral voices, and the ordinary world bends into magical realism.

Through the lens of philosophy and psychology, the novel probes the human condition: the ethics of leaving and staying, the pain of loving what cannot be possessed, and the quiet violence of survival in exile. It is a story of refugees seeking safety in Canada, Indigenous people carrying centuries of injustice, and the fragile, luminous intersections of hearts and histories.

CHAPTER 1 – THE SKY THAT WAS PROMISED

Nahom first understood freedom while standing in freezing water.

Many years later, standing knee-deep in the chilly current of the Elbow River, Nahom would look up and remember the first Canadian sky, vast and pale, stretching above him like the gaze of a distant god. That sky had watched his twenty-year exile with indifference, and now, Freedom stood where it always had visible, untouchable, unseeing.

Though the flight to Toronto Pearson lasted eighteen hours, he felt aged. His knees ached. His shoulders didn't relax down from his ears. His fingers found the crumpled cigarette pack in his pocket. He rolled the cigarette between his fingers to feel the freedom he'd chased since childhood. When his beaten-up suitcase finally showed up on the carousel, he grabbed it like the whole airport might disappear. Airports had always triggered the old panic: suspicious questions, lines, ending in rejection. He pushed himself forward.

Behind the counter sat a woman with eyes the colour of winter fog. Her gaze landed on him—the tall Black man with wild hair, a face etched with sleeplessness, a smile that wavered between defiance and desperation. She looked at his passport, then said the words that had followed him across deserts and oceans, through camps and borders:

"Refugee from Eritrea."

And then, for the first time in twenty years: "Welcome to Canada."

Welcome. The word sat in his mouth like water offered to someone who'd forgotten how to swallow. He hadn't heard it since he was a kid, in another language, from grandparents who were now gone. It was a drink offered after a long thirst, but his throat had forgotten how to swallow. His mind

didn't focus on the meaning, but on the opposite: the Sudanese border guard's sneering chin jerk; the bored "no, no" from the Egyptian officer as he waved him back; the Israeli detention agent's silent, pointing finger to a line of unwanted people. Each memory was a stone in his hand. This woman's words felt like an attempt to take that weight away, and he almost pulled back. The pleasant strangeness of it was a taste on his tongue, both sweet and odd, like a fruit he'd loved in a childhood dream.

She indicated the twelfth line. One more officer. The same practised grin. Calm, rehearsed movements with a good-natured tone of habit.

Smiles had never given safety. Still, when she smiled at him, something in his chest loosened before he could stop it. He remembered the men who smiled at checkpoints before hitting. The authorities at the camps who grinned as they took him to the end of the queue. Smiles were forerunners of denial and disguises of savagery. But what about this? Was it only a waiting room until the next exile, another stage?

The officer examined him with patient weariness—one swamped by a thousand lives, each stamped and signed. The questions were beyond suspicion. When the landing papers slid across the counter, it was so simple, so plain, that Nahom paused. His hand hovered, half-expecting them to be pulled back. For twenty years, every paper had been a demand, a rejection, a reminder that he didn't matter. This one felt different.

Outside, his hands shaking, he lit a cigarette. Smoke filled his lungs; it was not just a habit, but a freedom now. Each drag reminded him that his breath was his, and his alone.

Above him, the sky was so bright it looked painted. A blue he'd forgotten existed. Clouds floated by, plentiful and calm, and for the first time, he didn't feel excluded from their peace. The world was opening up. The air he breathed was his own.

It was the kind of sky his mother would have loved.

He remembered her hug the day he left, how she held him like she'd never let go. The sky is the same everywhere, she had said, pointing to the horizon. Even when they take everything else, they can't steal that.

The sky here was different—cleaner, softer, like no one had ever set it on fire. Nahom wondered if his mother had ever dreamed of such a sky, or if she had died under the one that watched them both cry.

The taxi smelled of cumin and old sweat—a smell that usually made his chest tight. Home, or what was left of it. The driver was from his country, his face showing the same lines of exile, his eyes dull like burnt-out light bulbs. When Nahom greeted him in their shared language, the man just grunted, changing gears so roughly it was like even the car didn't want him there.

"Take me to the hotel closest to the airport," Nahom said, pressing his hand to the window to steady himself. "I'm going to Calgary tomorrow."

"Just off the plane, huh?" The driver's voice was flat. "You'll feel the cold. But it's nothing compared to the cold we carry inside."

Nahom met his eyes in the rearview mirror. They shared a tired understanding. "How's life here?"

"They sell you a perfect dream," the driver said. "You spend your life chasing it, only to find it's rotten inside. We just swap one hunger for another."

Neon lights and snow zipped by. Nahom thought of his mother, who promised that beyond wars and hunger, there were places of light. Now he was in that bright place, yet the man who should have been like a brother spoke like a prisoner counting the days.

The next morning, his plane landed in Calgary. Outside was just endless white, like the earth was wrapped in a clean, white cloth. Streets and roofs were buried under winter snow. He leaned his head against the cold window, watching the view pass by like a half-remembered dream.

Looking down at that frozen city, he understood that a welcome was just a start. What came next was the slow, real process of figuring out where you'd landed and everything you'd brought with you to get there.

CHAPTER 2 – THE SETTLEMENT

Nahom's uncle waited for him at the airport, looking older, tired. He seemed both familiar and a stranger. When he saw Nahom, his eyes did a funny thing, like he recognised him but also looked sad.

"Nahom."

Hearing his name after so long hit him hard. Then came a hug, a real one, the first in ages. It cracked open the tough shell he'd built around himself since he was a kid. His uncle felt skinnier than he remembered. The woolly, smoky smell of his coat brought back old times.

His uncle let out a sigh, heavy with years gone by and goodbyes never said. He didn't let go.

Nahom looked past him, through the glass, at Calgary spreading out under a sky the colour of wet cement. He spotted a dark line in the distance, cutting through the white: the Elbow River. For a second, it felt less like just scenery and more like a real thing, watching the city back.

"It looks like a dead city," he said quietly. Even though he'd spent twenty years escaping heat and dust, he felt a sudden sadness. Cities were like mothers, their streets like brothers and sisters, their trees like fathers. He'd loved them, even when they didn't love him back.

"Dead and cold," his uncle agreed. "It wakes up in summer. The river does too." He waved his hand vaguely, as if summer might just show up if he called it.

Nahom braced himself for questions about Eritrea, old friends, the family still over there. But none came. Maybe his uncle didn't have the energy. Or maybe those questions were just too heavy for a reunion this delicate.

The car ride was silent. The tyres whispered over the snow, like enemies sneaking around. Silence was never peaceful; it brought fear. He'd been born in fear, grew up with it, and it had carried him across continents, like a drowning man grabbing onto something that just pulled him further down.

He thought of his father.

In those last years, with the dictatorship's silent, watchful fear everywhere, no father with a son was allowed to sleep in his own bed. The President's suspicion covered the whole country. Soldiers from Isaias Afwerki's government patrolled at night, enforcing a curfew that was really just a way to keep everyone isolated. His father, like other farmers, was told to sleep in his fields, guarding against fake spies and troublemakers. But a father is still a father. After midnight, when the dogs were quiet and fewer patrols were out, he'd sneak like a ghost along the dry creek beds, climb the compound wall with his tough hands, and drop silently into the yard. His gentle landing was a rustle, a soft thud, the most special sound in Nahom's world. For an hour, sometimes two, he was simply there, a warm, breathing presence in the dark, a hand on his sleeping child's head.

Until the night the boots didn't pass by.

They must have followed him. They didn't come yelling, but with a terrible quiet efficiency. The door, never strong, splintered open. The room filled with the smell of sweat, cheap uniform fabric, and oiled metal. They didn't ask questions. They dragged his father from his mat by his ankles. His head hit the floorboards with a sound like a melon dropping on a rock. Nahom, frozen next to his mother, saw his father try to get up, his mouth trying to form a reassuring word or a plea. A soldier put his boot on his chest, holding him down. Another bent close to his face.

"You're the spy," he said, his voice completely calm. It was just a statement of fact.

The rifle butt came down once. Then again. There was no fuss about it. It was just work. When they stepped back, his father's eyes found Nahom's across the short, awful distance. They opened wide, not with pain, but with a final, heartbreaking clarity. Then the light in them just went out. The soldiers left as fast as they came, their job done. One of them mumbled the usual phrase for such situations: "He got what he deserved."

The blood slowly spread on the packed dirt floor. In that quiet moment, Nahom understood. The powerful ones, men with boots and rifles who could call you a traitor, controlled his life. The kind God of his mother's hymns was nowhere in that room.

"Here we are," his uncle said, pulling into a small garage. Snow bent the roofline. Nahom blinked. The memory faded like smoke.

He stepped out, his boots sinking into the snow, realising this wasn't just another temporary stop. This was where his life would either start fresh or end alone and quiet.

Snow kept falling, calm and uncaring, as it always had, as it always would.

The basement felt like it swallowed him. Low ceiling. Damp walls. Air that smelled sour and mouldy. A thin mattress sagged in the corner; a narrow closet leaned; a single chair sat there like an afterthought. When he leaned his head against the small window, streetlights flickered like candles at a vigil.

On the third day, his uncle came downstairs, his boots thudding like a judge's hammer.

"I found you a job. You'll be a butcher."

The word hit him. "A butcher? I don't know how..."

"You're Eritrean. Our land is full of butchers. It's in your blood." His voice wasn't mean, just final. The word "butcher" seemed to grow in the damp air. It wasn't just a job anymore. It brought to mind the men who came at night, who handled metal and bone. It was the President in his palace, carving up a country. It was history itself, a line of bloodshed passed down like a family trait. His uncle meant that staying alive in their homeland always involved knowing the knife, whether you held it or it was held to you. "My friend is a manager there. He'll teach you. Be happy; it's this or warehouses, and those are hell.

"Canada must have better jobs."

"Canada is good. America too. But freedom needs cheap labour. Nothing comes free."

The slaughterhouse smelled of blood and cleaner. Steel shined under the bright lights. The electric cutter shrieked when Nahom touched it, slicing into animal bodies that swung slowly, almost alive in their own way. Meat slapped against his apron, warm and red. The smell followed him home, even into his sleep.

At night, the basement filled with strange sights. Heads without bodies rolled toward him, laughing. He woke up gasping, his hands clawing at the blanket.

He started drinking. The bottle stopped the cutter's screams, but dreams still snuck through.

One evening, a co-worker leaned over a rail of hanging lambs, his eyes glassy not from the cold but from something deep inside him. He caught Nahom's eye and grinned, a slow, tired grin. "Just wait," he said, in a quiet voice, like he was sharing a secret about the job. "Just wait for summer." He nodded towards the high, sealed windows, with the city beyond. "Out there,

the streets… they blossom. Not with flowers." He wiped his hands on his apron, leaving a faint, pink smudge. "With legs. Bare legs. Walking, running, crossing in the sun." He paused, his gaze wandering over the pale bodies swaying gently on their hooks. A long, quiet moment passed. "Living meat," he finally mumbled, almost to himself. The word "living" hung in the cold air, so full of longing it felt like sorrow. It wasn't a wish spoken, but a lack revealed—the basic human need of a man who spent his days reducing life to pieces and weight, dreaming of a warmth that moved on its own, always just out of reach, behind the glass.

The words stuck in Nahom's chest, cold and troubling. Flesh everywhere.

He stumbled back to the basement. His reflection blurred in the window, snow covering his face. He pressed his forehead to the glass.

"Oh God," he whispered. "Why so much flesh? Why cover the earth with it?"

The bottle slipped, breaking. Alcohol spread dark across the concrete. He lay down, letting the basement close over him like dirt, drifting into hooks, snow, endless laughing flesh.

The basement's cold got into his bones. Each night he lay on the mattress, clenching his teeth against the chill from the concrete. The walls were damp; his breath hung pale like smoke. He pressed his palms together, as if prayer might warm them, but no words came. Only one thought kept coming back: this isn't living; this is a slow way to die.

At work, he let a complaint slip out. "It's like sleeping inside a refrigerator."

A colleague, tired but kind, stopped what he was doing. "You should go to school. It's free here—for new people. I'll take you."

School. The word brought a cool breeze. For a moment it calmed the burning desire inside him. Then memory pulled him back; he was a boy

again, holding his father's hand under a spring sky. Teachers stood at the gate, their eyes sharp. Mornings were spent singing hymns to a gentle, unseen God. Afternoons were spent with men with thick moustaches and heavy boots, teaching them obedience, silence, fear.

The memory of his father's empty eyes came back, as it always did, showing him the truth.

That night, after the soldiers took the body and the neighbours cleaned the dirt, the house was just a hollow shell filled with whispers. His mother sat on the floor, holding him, a ten-year-old bundle of bones and terror, in her arms. She wasn't crying. Her silence was bigger than any sound. He tilted his head back to look at her. In the deep darkness, her eyes shimmered with a terrifying mix: a bottomless love that seemed to physically hurt, a sharp, animal fear for him, and a sorrow so deep it had stopped her breathing. Those eyes were the only light in the world.

"I will run," he whispered, the words coming out like a secret.

Her arms tightened around him, as if her body fought against the decision her mind knew was needed. She pressed her lips to his forehead, his eyelids, his cheeks, as if mapping him, a useless attempt to keep him safe inside herself. Her touch was feverish. When she finally spoke, her voice was a raw, thin sound. "Then you must live." It wasn't a blessing, but a command carved in pain. Letting him go was like tearing out her own heart, but keeping him meant giving him to the slaughterers. The sacrifice hung between them, awful and absolute.

But Nahom, snuggled against the warmth he would forever after connect with loss, turned his face away. He wanted to survive, and surviving needed a toughness that her love, in all its intense brightness, couldn't afford.

So he ran.

Two days later, Sudan's border opened like a crack in a wall. At Shagarab camp, life shrank down to just waiting. Eventually, he followed others to Khartoum.

They paid for a private car, travelling under the cover of night, as shapes moved with covered faces and heavy guns. One pressed a barrel to his head. He did what they said.

The desert swallowed them. Days blurred. Hunger chewed at him. At one stop, people were shoved into a water truck. Metal walls pressed in. Air got thin. By the time the hatch opened, three bodies weren't moving.

After five months in Sinai, he slipped into Israel. Six years as a man without papers or protection.

And now, this basement. This cold. This sky that promised nothing, but for the first time, it belonged to him as much as to anyone.

He looked at the small window, at the snow still falling. The sky was turning a deeper grey, the colour of forgetting. But under it, somewhere, flowed the Elbow River—a dark, steady presence he hadn't yet truly seen, already waiting in his memory.

He understood then, with a clear feeling that was like a new kind of coldness, that he'd brought something with him that no clean, soft sky could ever wash away. It wasn't in his suitcase. It was the exact weight and feel of a dying man's hand, held in the dark of a desert truck. A debt of survival he could neither pay back nor name. And beneath that, older and colder, was the memory of blood on a dirt floor, and the voice of a soldier calling his father a spy.

CHAPTER 3 – THE GRAMMAR OF LOSS

The cold in the basement wasn't just there; it worked its way in. It was a slow, creeping thing that got to Nahom before he woke up, settling in his throat and between his knuckles. Every morning, he'd wake from a light sleep to find it waiting, always there. The concrete floor helped, holding onto the night's chill like someone hoarding money. A single drip from a leaky pipe kept time. Plink. Plink. It sounded like a slow leak on a sinking boat.

And then there was the smell. A faint, metallic smell in the damp air, the ghost of the slaughterhouse. It had made a home in his nose. It stayed on his skin, in his sweater, a smell so strong he'd sometimes wake up choking, the dream of warm, red water washing over his boots still clear in his mind.

The butcher's knife was his scripture until four o'clock. Then, he'd scrub his hands raw under super hot water, a routine that never quite got rid of the greasy feeling, and get on a different bus. The evening ride was full of tired, grey faces, all showing the same weariness from changing shifts. But he wasn't going to another warehouse.

He was going to a school.

The red-brick building glowed in the early winter darkness, its windows bright yellow squares. A simple sign by the door read LINC, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada. Every evening, walking towards those doors felt like heading for a lit dock from a dark sea. Inside, the heat was a shock, and the bright lights were like a cleansing flood, washing away the day's dirt and the taste of metal from his mind.

The classroom was a safe place where everyone felt out of place together. The air buzzed with Hindi, Farsi, Somali, and the soft, familiar sound of

Tigrinya from Sara, who sat next to him. She folded herself into her chair as if making herself small was a kind of politeness. Here, hope wasn't just an ad; it was real: it was in the shared, worn-out dictionaries, the patient repeating of a hard phrase, the shared, tired win when a sentence finally made sense. It was the light you carried home inside you, to hold against the basement's darkness.

Then Ali came in, and the room subtly changed. The classroom door opened with a whoosh of air from the hall, and he brought the damp cold in on his coat, but his presence was a slow warming. He was their teacher, but he didn't stand behind the podium. He sat on the edge of a desk, unwrapping a long scarf from his neck.

"A science fact," he announced, his voice warm and low, filling the quiet. "The cold outside is the same temperature as the inside of my freezer. I checked." A hesitant wave of laughter went through the room. He smiled, a genuine smile, tired at the edges, that reached his eyes. It was the smile of someone responsible for other people's delicate things, who had chosen, despite feeling worn out, to be careful with them.

He let the smile stay, then asked, "So, what's colder? The Canadian winter, or the job you do to get by?" The question hung in the air, not needing an answer, but inviting a shared truth. That was his style – a question that was part grammar, part philosophy, wrapped in the gentle humour of their new life. He didn't wait for replies. "I think in Canada, we have two economies," he went on, leaning forward like he was sharing a secret. "The one for resumes, and the one for reality. One asks for your degrees. The other just asks for your back, or your heart. A lot of times, both."

His humour was a way of showing he understood, a way of saying, I see the gap between the dream you thought you were getting and the life you're making now. It put them at ease. He didn't need to raise his voice – when he spoke, the students' quiet wasn't about obeying, but about real attention. At

that moment, he seemed less like someone just giving lessons and more like a fellow person trying to figure out a hard text, inviting them to help.

Lessons often started by acknowledging life as it was. "Before we work on verbs," Ali would say, his tone softening into a real check-in, "let's talk about our lives. How was your week? Your family?"

There was Faten, from Palestine. She sat in the back, a woman in her thirties whose eyes were always looking somewhere far away. Her quiet wasn't shy like Sara's; it was heavy, full of unspoken things. When Ali first asked about her family, she had said, "They are there. I am here." The space between those words held a whole world of fear.

And there was Eyal, from Israel. A quiet man in his forties with careful eyes and a calm about him. He spoke precisely, picking his new English words like someone choosing tools for a delicate job. He kept his notebook neatly, his handwriting small, clean blocks. He had mentioned once, in passing, that he used to be a bookseller. Here, in this room, he seemed to be slowly putting back together a language that, for him, had been broken and rebuilt into something both strange and needed.

Today, the lesson plan on the board read: Present Perfect Tense. Have/Has + Past Participle. To describe past actions with present consequences.

Ali started, as always, with the human side of grammar. He moved to Faten's desk. His voice was soft, gentle. "Faten. How is your family?"

She didn't look up at first. She was tracing the wood grain of the particle-board desk with a fingernail. The room held its breath, feeling a change in her sorrow. Then she lifted her head. Her eyes weren't full of tears, but empty. Dry, bottomless, and completely still.

"They all died yesterday."

The sentence dropped into the quiet room not with a scream, but with the solidness of a stone falling into a deep, dry well. No shaking, just the hit. Thud.

The present perfect tense hung in the air, awful and useless. Have died. Has died. A grammar rule for a disaster.

Ali's body seemed to sag. His shoulders, usually upright with his teaching, drooped as if suddenly carrying a physical weight. His head tilted down a bit, not in prayer, but under the weight of a fallen sky. He didn't reach out to touch her. He knew some hurts were too fresh for touch. He just stood there, a man whose lesson plan had just been wiped out by the truth.

The class was frozen. Sara had both hands to her mouth. Nahom felt the words echo in his own chest: They all died. It was the worst, most terrible way to put things. The verb to be completely gone.

Then, a chair scraped softly.

Eyal had stood up. He didn't look directly at Faten, but he was facing her, offering his presence. His face, usually calm, was pale, his eyes wide with an understanding that was more than just pity.

"My brother," he said, his voice a fragile thread in the silence. It was thick with an accent, but the sadness in it was a language everyone understood. "My brother was also killed. Two weeks ago. In uniform." He paused, swallowing hard, his gaze finally finding Faten's bowed head. "I am so… so very sorry for your loss."

The room seemed to tip. The two losses, from opposite sides of an old conflict, now shared the same unbearable air. Ali watched, his heart beating fast. He saw the real pain in Eyal's eyes, not politics, but the raw, confusing agony of a brother gone.

"Thank you, Eyal," Ali said, his own voice hoarse. He looked at both of them. "This room is for language. And sometimes, the truest language is sadness.

It doesn't need to be translated." He picked his next words carefully, like someone walking on thin ice. "Politics makes its points. But sadness… sadness only makes its demands. Here, we respect the demand, not the point."

He looked into Faten's eyes again. And in their dark emptiness, he didn't see a single tear. He saw sadness growing. It was a sorrow that overflowed, had no map or end, and spread across the worn classroom floor, out the door, across the frozen city, until it felt like the whole world was soaked in the bitter truth of knowing.

Ali found his breath. "I am so sorry, Faten," he said, the words completely inadequate, but the only ones he had. "You can stay. Or you can go. There are no rules today. Only what you need."

She nodded once, then picked up her single notebook and left, like a ghost leaving a scene that couldn't hold her anymore.

Eyal slowly sat back down, staring at his hands, tightly clasped on the desk.

The lesson didn't continue. Ali erased the board. He told them to read silently; his own eyes fixed on the blank space where grammar had been. The classroom felt like a church after a bomb had blown out the stained glass, leaving only the harsh, plain light of pain. Nahom stared at the empty page in front of him, thinking not of verb tenses, but of two endless losses, now haunting the same small room, and of the teacher who had gently refused to let them be enemies in their sorrow.

That evening, in his small apartment, Ali didn't grade papers. He turned on the television for background noise. A news channel showed diplomats in fancy suits and colourful ties, shaking hands over a table of delicate food. A graphic read: Peace Talks Progress. A commentator's voice, smooth as polished wood, talked about calming things down and safe passages.

Ali didn't see any of it. He saw only Faten's empty stare. He heard the anchor's voice change, thinning into a static hiss that seemed to say, don’t worry. They will also die.

He reached for his notebook, not the one for lessons, but the one with the marbled cover where he kept his poems. His hand moved almost on its own, carving the horror into sharp lines of verse.

The Grammar of 'They All Died'
I started my day with the lesson plan.
But lesson plans are like battle plans;
they die when the first shot is fired.
My page still said: Present Perfect Tense.
"How is your family?" I asked, a gentle sentence
to connect a life that was left behind.
For my student from Palestine,
the question hung like a dust-choked sun,
a daily count of what the gun took.
Today, she met it with an empty stare,
a silence that broke the morning air.
Then, the answer, final, complete:
"They all died."
The sentence fell.
My head, a heavy stone, dropped to my chest.
The weight of it pushed down,
a collapsed sky on my forehead.
I feared the crack in her eyes,
the world I would find there.
I looked.
And in the dark pools of her eyes,
a single tear didn't just fall—it grew,
it spilled over, it had no path, no end,

it spread across the floor, the street, the city,
until the whole universe was soaked in salt.
That night, I turned on the TV, saw
the big leaders in shiny suits, colourful ties,
shaking hands over fancy food.
A peace agreement. Then, a voice, thin as static, said:
Don't worry. They will also die.

He closed the notebook. The poem wasn't about setting free, but about holding in. It was a box for an unspeakable moment, the only way he knew to contain the chaos.

A month later, the New Canadians Success Night happened under the harsh lights of rented chandeliers. Maple leaf banners hung like friendly occupation flags. Administrators moved through the crowd with the calm confidence of helpful people, their hands never touching the worn cuffs or rough hands of the people they were supposed to be helping.

Nahom walked beside Ali, who held a cup of syrupy punch like a prop he wasn't sure how to use. He looked like a well-read poetry book left on a shelf of business manuals. His eyes, Nahom noticed, seemed older, as if they had taken on some of Faten's emptiness.

The awards started. Outstanding Community Ally. Excellence in Diversity Innovation. Plaques went into the hands of men and women in crisp suits, people who spoke easily about how much difference they made and working together for results. Their smiles were ready for photos. Their world was one of big offices, high above the tight classrooms where futures – and whole families – could be wiped out between the present and the perfect tense.

"Teacher," Nahom whispered, a hot feeling of unfairness in his chest. "Why don't you get an award? You help everyone. You actually see us."

Ali's gaze stayed on the stage, his voice low and flat. "I'm too helpful in the background to be put in the spotlight. Awards are for the people who create the story. The people who do the hard work are kept in the yard, mixing cement." He thought of his poem, a truer record than any plaque. "Some things they can't frame and hang on a wall."

The director's voice echoed, praising life-changing experiences. Ali leaned closer, his words for Nahom only. "Their business is helping newcomers. But their actual product is the story about helping newcomers. A picture of despair becomes proof of purpose. We aren't the audience here. We are the props." He thought of Faten, a prop in no one's story but her own tragedy.

He took a sip of the overly sweet punch. "Never forget, Nahom. Immigrants are a huge business in Canada. And sadness… sadness doesn't make money. It doesn't show up on their financial reports."

The clear, cold truth of it hit Nahom: his uncle’s tired eyes, the cab driver's bitterness, the endless hunger of the slaughterhouse, and Faten's ruined silence were all part of the same sorrow. They were parts of the same huge, efficient machine that ran on hope, and crushed everything that didn't fit its plan.

Later, when an Innovative Teaching award went to a woman who was good with data-tracking software, instead of Ali, the students nearby slumped in their seats. Ali clapped, softly and without emotion, like a man watching a play from the back row, already knowing the ending. His mind was on a different measure: the weight of a crushing silence, the scope of a single, world-flooding tear.

Afterward, a student came up, her face showing disappointment. "Teacher, we thought you would win."

Ali's soft laugh had the warmth of real valuable things. "Winning isn't the work. Teaching is the work. Sometimes the work is just… being there. And not looking away."

Outside, snow fell in a quiet, steady curtain. Ali stood on the steps, his face tilted to the bruised orange sky, as if looking for the original promise in the light pollution. Nahom moved beside him, the cold biting through his jacket. He put a hand on Ali's shoulder, a solid, steady weight.

"You are the best teacher I ever had."

Ali turned. In his eyes, Nahom saw a light flicker, not the bright, dead glare of the chandeliers, but the stubborn, soft glow of a lamp in a window, seen from a cold street. It was the look of a man who had faced a student's grief and hadn't offered empty phrases, but a poem. A man whose name had finally been recognised, not by a system, but by a human heart.

"Then I will keep going," Ali said, the words a quiet promise to the night, to Faten, to all of them.

He walked into the falling snow, a lone figure carrying a small, determined warmth against the biting cold. Nahom watched him until he was swallowed by the white, understanding now that some wins don't get plaques, don't cast shadows on a stage. They exist in the steady, uncelebrated act of coming back. Of showing up. Of giving a single, right word to another lost soul, and by being there for the unspeakable, refusing, together, to let the world freeze shut, or to let its terrible, silent truths win.

CHAPTER 4 – THE VANISHING HEART

The snow wasn't really falling; it was more like the sky was slowly dissolving into tiny, quiet pieces. Inside Tim Hortons, the bright lights made everything look washed out. It was nine o'clock, that weird, slow time between work shifts and dinner. Nahom held his double-double, letting the hot cup warm his cold hands. Across the table, Ali stirred his black coffee, the spoon making a soft, steady sound against the mug.

This had become their routine. After Nahom's English class, Ali would sometimes point to the door. He'd call it a debrief, which made their meetings sound official and important. But really, it was just friendship, the kind immigrants often share, starting in class and growing stronger with the mutual understanding that living here meant more than just knowing the language.

"The cold in that place gets into the meat," Nahom said quietly. He wasn't looking at Ali, but at the steam from his cup. "Or maybe it comes from the meat. I don't even know anymore. My hands... they don't feel warm, not even here." He squeezed them, like checking to make sure they were still there. "The saw screams. The boss watches. And the smell... it's like the truth. It tells you exactly what you're made of, and what you're taking apart."

Ali listened, his eyes steady, no pity there. He just nodded slowly, like a teacher acknowledging a good, tough answer. When Nahom finished, Ali took a slow drink of his coffee.

"My contract is for twelve hours a week," he said simply. "Twelve. They call it 'maximum flexibility.' For the college, not for me." He put his cup down. "My student reviews? Perfect. The other teachers ask me for lesson plans. Rona, with her clipboard, says I have a 'gift for community-building.'" He

said the corporate-sounding words with a soft, careful touch of irony, a hint of his classroom humour. "But the new teacher from Ottawa, who calls our students 'challenging,' gets twice as many hours. I asked about it. I've been... politely flexible."

Nahom frowned, leaning in. "It's because you're..." He paused, trying to find the unspoken word between them, one about his origins, his name, and a religion that wasn't considered neutral here.

Ali met his eyes, and his own held a gentle, firm light. He didn't say yes or no. Instead, he shook his head slightly, almost imperceptibly, quietly closing that topic. He wouldn't give that reason the fuel of an argument. He wasn't going to teach Nahom how to complain tonight.

"The system has its own weather," Ali said, his tone changing, becoming practical and forward-thinking. "We dress for it. We move on." He tapped the table between them. "That's why you're done with that butcher job. That kind of cold is different. It stops your heart."

Nahom stared. "Done? How? The rent…"

"Is paid by work," Ali finished. He pulled out his phone, tapped the screen, and slid it across the table. It showed a map with small moving cars. "This is my other classroom. The art of pizza delivery, the wisdom of pho runs. It's not fancy. But you pick your own hours, and the cold... the cold stays outside the car." A small, ironic smile touched his lips. "I'll teach you. How to get around. How to smile at the door even when you're tired. How to make the app work for you." He took his phone back, a done deal. "It's still a job, Nahom. But it's not a slaughterhouse."

Outside, the snow kept quietly falling apart. Inside, a different kind of warmth was starting. The offer lay on the table, simple and real. It wasn't someone rescuing him, but a rope thrown by a man who was also struggling to stay afloat. Nahom looked from his teacher's tired, determined face to the

bright white outside the window, and for the first time in months, he felt a change that wasn't despair. It was the quiet, scary turning point toward a different kind of making it.

Ali's hands, resting at ten and two on the steering wheel, showed his two lives. Faint pen marks from grading mixed with the tough skin he got from gripping steering wheels and carrying insulated bags. That morning's lesson had been about the tricky way to show respect: Sir, Ma'am, Excuse me, please. Ali's hands had moved in the air, showing how the right words could open a door, and the wrong ones could lock it.

But even as he taught, part of his mind was counting down. His eyes kept going to the clock. It was an old habit. Three minutes before the bell, right on schedule, a shadow had cut across the light from the hallway. Rona. She never came in; she just stood in the doorway, her posture a perfect example of managerial watching. She held her clipboard not like a tool, but like a symbol of power and distance, proof of her authority and her detachment.

"Your hard work is noticed, Ali," she'd said, her voice a carefully controlled sound of concern that always felt like an audit. "But our funding depends on attendance. We need to be... careful with the clock." Her smile was a quick, precise tightening of her face, a technical skill. It never reached her eyes, which were the pale, judging grey of a frozen puddle. Her gaze swept the room, over Sara, Anil, Nahom, and the others from a list of broken places, and her expression softened into a look of public pity, a look he was sure she practised in her neat office mirror. She had a Master's in Literacy Education and the firm belief that no one, especially not a popular teacher with different ways of doing things, could possibly know her students better than she did from her spreadsheets. To Ali, she moved through the school like a smooth, wary fox, her head cocked at classroom doors, peeking, judging, always protecting her space from a threat she couldn't quite name but had decided was him.

The memory disappeared as the Camry's wipers battled a fresh burst of snow, pulling him back to the road, the bags of cooling food in his backseat, and the next address glowing on his phone.

Now, in the car, Ali's knuckles were white. The heater coughed out stale, dusty air, not doing much more than moving the cold around.

"You mustn't think it's strange," Ali said, his voice low, cutting through the dull noise. "It's just work."

Nahom watched his teacher's profile. The tired patience from the classroom was still there, but now mixed with a hunter's focus, a man reading an invisible map of addresses and deadlines. "It's not the work. It's the... change. In the classroom, you're a name. Here, you become a number on a screen. A dot on a map."

Ali gave a small shrug. "The body needs a roof. The mind needs a quiet spot. In this country, you don't just get them. They're things on a list." He slowed down, not for a drop-off, but for a pick-up. A restaurant sign glowed bright neon in the fading light. "My quiet spot is paid for by three hours of teaching verbs. The rest..." He pulled the car into a slushy parking space. "The rest is the business of being invisible."

Inside, the air felt thick and heavy, filled with the smell of frying oil, cumin, and lemon. Two young women behind the host stand glowed under warm hanging lights. As Ali and Nahom stepped in, shaking snow from their boots, the women looked up. Their smiles were instant, bright, professional. One smoothed her hair. The other leaned forward a bit, subtly offering attention, her body angled against the tall stand that kept her stuck for eight-hour shifts. Nahom noticed her slight shift from one foot to the other, a small, unconscious protest against the hard floor. In a country with so much, he thought, a stool was apparently too expensive for a human back.

"Welcome! Table for two?"

Ali was already on his phone, a practical man skipping the polite talk. "Pick-up. For Ryan. 427."

The change was instant, like a chemical reaction. The forced warmth left their faces. The smiling one straightened up, her posture changing from host to guard, her feet settling back into their tired, rooted stance. Her colleague's eyes slid away, looking at something past their shoulders. The first woman silently turned to a tablet. The reclassification was complete: from possible customers to logistical obstacles.

They waited by the door. Nahom watched the women go back to their soft, laughing conversation, their eyes carefully avoiding the men with snowmelt puddling at their feet. One leaned her hip against the counter, a quick half-sit that lasted only a second before she pushed herself upright again, as if an invisible manager reminded her. When the bag was handed over, it was passed across the counter like something a bit illegal, a deal to be finished without touching.

Back in the car, the greasy smell surrounding them, Nahom finally spoke. "You saw? Their faces."

Ali started the engine, a dry, papery laugh escaping him. "I saw the moment I stopped being a man and became a function. A delivery guy." He pulled onto the street. "But look closer. See the girls who have to stand until their veins ache, for the crime of doing a job. A country that makes a chair for every purpose won't buy one for its cashier. Why? Because if she sits, she might feel human. And a human might ask for more." He glanced at Nahom, the city lights washing over his tired face. "This is the real Canada. It lives in the disappearing smile, and in the simple, denied kindness of a place to rest your feet."

Nahom looked out at the hypnotic falling snow. It was a smaller cruelty than a rifle butt, but it worked the same way: turning a person into an inconvenient fact.

"Rona's grandparents were colonial officers," Ali said at a red light, his voice flat. "She talks about legacy, about standards. Last month, at the fancy party, she cried telling a Syrian family's sad story. Real tears. They sparkled under the chandeliers. The donation envelopes got fat." The light turned green. "The next day, she cut that family's childcare money. 'Sustainability,' she called it."

Nahom saw it then: Rona's sharp, foxy cleverness and the way she navigated the messy bureaucracy, always coming out well-fed.

"The school is her stage," Ali went on, his tone dull. "We're the actors, proving her show means something."

A chime from the phone. This time, Ali didn't move. He looked at Nahom, his eyes holding both a challenge and an offer. "Your turn. Number 58. The blue door. Leave the bag. Take the picture. Don't ring the bell."

The cold hit like a sharp, sobering slap. Nahom's boots broke through a thin crust into deeper snow, the wetness instantly soaking into his clothes. He found the blue door. As he bent to put down the bag, a burst of laughter came from inside. The sound was so full and carefree it felt like a punch. He fumbled with the phone app, his numb fingers clumsy. The screen blurred. For a second of panic, he felt seven years old again, dropping something precious in the dirt. He got the proof and backed away, feeling like a thief.

Back in the car, he shivered, his whole body shaking. "It's... a particular kind of loneliness."

Ali handed him a rag. "Yes. The classroom has its own. Watching a student grasp a word that will become a tool, and knowing the system only cares about her attendance, not her learning." He started the car, the wipers resuming their useless fight. "One loneliness is made of ice. The other is made of paper. But both can stop your heart if you stand still too long."

The windows fogged up, enclosing them in a private, damp cloud. Nahom stared at the condensation, tracing a meaningless pattern. "I used to write stories," he confessed, the words quiet as a secret. "Now I only write my name, my address, my number. The words have no life in them."

Ali was silent for a long moment, the only sound the thump-thump-slide of the wipers. "Then you must not let those be the only words," he said finally, his voice firm. "Your real value is the man who writes stories. Rona's system can count your hours, but it can't put a number on him. Protect him." He signalled a turn. "I will teach you these streets. They don't remember or forgive. But you can learn how they work. This work will be here when the teaching hours are cut. It's not really living. But it's the support that makes living possible."

Nahom looked at him. In the green glow of the dashboard, Ali's face was a landscape of shadows and determination, a man carrying two different kinds of burdens. Yet his hands on the wheel were steady.

"I get it," Nahom said.

"Good," said Ali. "Now watch the curve up ahead. Black ice is a patient enemy."

And the car moved on, a fragile bubble of temporary warmth, drawing two parallel lines of hope and giving up into the endless, growing white.

By Saturday, the basement's cold had spread into his soul. The silence there wasn't empty; it felt like something was present, the quiet of a room waiting for a life that hadn't shown up. He texted Ali: Teacher, are you free? Let’s get a drink. Downtown.

The reply was quick: The budget for fun is in the red this month, my friend.

Nahom typed back: My treat. For the lessons not on the whiteboard.

They met at the train station. The LRT took them east, a smooth, electric glide toward the city's bright centre. Nahom watched his own reflection moving past the darkness outside. It was a face still trying to make peace with the calm around it.

They stepped out into a grand space of man-made light. Glass and steel towers rose like icy cliffs. A planned waterfall spilled from a hanging garden into a misty pool. On the riverwalk, trees were decorated with tiny, pulsing lights, nature forced to be part of the show.

"It looks like a dream," Nahom whispered, the cold air turning his words to smoke.

"A very pricey dream," Ali said, his worn coat a silent protest against the sparkle. "The river under it is the same. Only the costume is new."

They walked toward the water. The change was sudden. The artificial glow faded, replaced by the scattered, lonely gleam of safety lamps. Here, the Elbow River was a wide, dark muscle flowing with a sound deeper than the city's hum, an ancient whisper. The cheerful lights of the towers didn't light up this space; they just made its separation clearer, painting the riverbank in shades of exclusion.

Ali glanced at Nahom. "This walk feels like crossing a border. Like we're going from one country to another within the same city."

Nahom led them to a doorway tucked between a fancy hotel and a corporate skyscraper. A brass plaque, worn with age, read The Anchor. Inside, it was a cozy cave of warm wood, dim lights, and the honest smell of polish and beer.

A waitress came over, her smile real, her eyes the bright green of a sunlit leaf. "What can I get you gentlemen?"

"Vodka. Straight up," Nahom said. Ali nodded for the same.

"Anything to eat?"

"Fish," Nahom said.

She left, and Nahom raised an eyebrow. "Fish? In a bar?"

"I eat halal," Ali said. "The batter is plain. It's... an acceptable compromise." A faint, ironic smile. "The vodka is for the permission my soul needs tonight."

The drinks came, clear and strong. The fish arrived, golden and steaming. "Enjoy!" she said, her smile still there.

"You see?" Nahom said, leaning in. "Tonight, we are customers. The smile doesn't disappear."

Ali took a slow sip, letting the burning liquid spread. "A temporary upgrade. Enjoy the view from this level. The fall back to being just a function always happens Monday morning."

The alcohol was like a key, turning a lock inside him. For an hour, the struggle to survive paused. They were just two men in the warm belly of a boat, the storm outside held at bay.

Ali leaned back, watching him. "So. The scenery and the cod were the bait. What's the catch?"

Nahom swirled the clear liquid, watching the swirl. "My teacher," he began, the words feeling risky. "What do you think about love?"

Ali coughed, putting his glass down with a sharp clink. "Love? Is this about Uliana? From the class?"

"Uliana?" Nahom looked truly surprised. "No."

"Because I see how she looks at you when you help her. There's something there."

Nahom waved a dismissive hand, but a blush gave him away. "No. This is... from back home. Hermela." He said the name like a secret code. He pulled out his phone, found her picture, and passed it across the table.

She was beautiful, with eyes that held both kindness and sharp intelligence. "She found me," Nahom said, awe softening his voice. "When I saw her face... it was like finding a furnished room in a house I thought was empty."

Ali handed the phone back, his expression unreadable. "So. A heart consultation. I'm not a doctor in this area."

"You're my only friend here who might understand how longing works."

Ali took a long drink, his gaze drifting to the dark window, as if seeing another river. "You say you feel her everywhere. That's nice. It's also a very heavy world to carry alone."

"Have you?" Nahom pressed, leaning forward. "Have you been in love like this?"

A deep, tired sadness settled behind Ali's eyes, the look of a man remembering an old ache. He was silent for so long Nahom thought the question had been forgotten.

"Let's talk about your love today," Ali said finally, his voice gentle but firm. "My stories are old books. Their spines are broken. Another time." He gestured for Nahom to continue.

Nahom's face lit up with an inner glow. "For so long, I thought my heart was just a pump. A reliable, mechanical thing. But now... with her... I feel her living here." He tapped his temple. "She's taken a room in the only place that's truly, completely mine."

Ali listened, his teacher's patience now used for the delicate language of feelings. "This love that lives in the mind... it can be a safe place. But the heart isn't a room. It's a wide river. It wants to flow. To reach the sea." He

paused, then his voice changed, taking on the rhythmic, old quality of a storyteller by a fire.

"There was a man in my village in Pakistan. Raheem Khan. He was built like you—strong, a force of nature. Our home was on the bank of the Indus, a river so wide and wild it made men feel small. Every morning, instead of the bus, Raheem Khan would swim twenty kilometres to his work downstream. It was his tradition. His way of saying no. Then, one morning, halfway, he saw a boat. And in it, a young woman, fishing. She had a calmness about her that made the wild river seem peaceful. Raheem Khan saw her, and his powerful arms, for the first time, struggled."

Nahom was captivated, his own drink forgotten. "What did he do?"

"He pretended to get a cramp. Cried out. The girl, worried, paddled over and pulled this huge, dripping man into her small boat." Ali took a sip of water. "He spent the whole day in that boat with her. He said it was the first time he had ever heard the river's true song. It was not a challenge, but a melody. When he came home that evening, he carried a new light inside him, quiet and real."

Nahom's face was bright with hope he felt for someone else.

"Yes," Ali said softly, watching that hope. "A love story. The next day, he went back. The boat wasn't there. He waited. He asked everyone in the villages along the bank. No one had seen her. It was as if she had been conjured from the river mist and, her purpose served, had returned to it."

The hope on Nahom's face faded, leaving behind a stark, familiar emptiness.

"Raheem Khan stopped swimming. He took the bus, staring at the water as it went by. The man who had conquered the current was conquered by a memory. He had loved a ghost."

The noise of the bar rushed back in, the clinking of glasses and the murmur of voices like a tide reclaiming the shore. Nahom looked down at his dark phone screen, seeing only his own blurred reflection.

"Why tell me this?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Not to hurt you," Ali said, reaching across to put a steadying hand on his forearm. "But to show you the river. Your love is real. But it's across an ocean. You must build a boat strong enough to cross those waters, Nahom. Don't just dream of the other side."

The waitress reappeared. "Another round?"

"No," Nahom said, not looking up. "Just the bill."

They stepped back into the night. The glittering towers now seemed gaudy, a child's fantasy hiding the deep, ancient darkness of the real river flowing beside them.

As they went down into the subway, Ali finally spoke, his words almost lost in the rumble of an approaching train. "Protect the man who can love, Nahom. The one you keep in that room. But don't let that room become the whole house. Build a life, real and steady, piece by piece, day by stubborn day, strong enough to maybe, one day, deserve her. The first step isn't dreaming of the shore. It's learning to swim in the water you're in."

The train doors hissed open. Nahom took a seat by the window, watching the sleeping sky. In the brief flashes of light, he didn't see tunnel walls. He saw a wide, sunny, brown river, powerful and uncaring. And on its distant bank, the outline of a man, no longer swimming, just watching the water pass, taking everything away.

He decided then, with a clarity that felt like a first breath, to find a notebook. Not to write his name or number. But to write one sentence, just one, that belonged only to him. To prove, to himself, that the man who told stories wasn't a ghost. He was a swimmer. And he was still here.

CHAPTER 5 – THE ARCHITECTURE OF WAITING

Spring didn't just show up in Calgary; it came out of hiding. The snow, like a giant white eraser, slowly pulled back, showing a world Nahom had completely forgotten: wet, dark dirt, the bare bones of last year's grass, and the quiet, sleeping flower bulbs. One morning, he woke up not to silence, but to a new sound—a steady, plink-plink-plink from the gutter outside his window. He got up and leaned his forehead against the cool glass. The world was crying as it came back to life. And with every drop, something inside him, a frozen lump he'd carried from the airport, slowly started to loosen up.

He was out of the basement. His new apartment was bright with sunlight, paid for by the hotel. The slaughterhouse smell was gone, replaced by the hotel lobby's usual scent: fresh linen, shiny wood, a subtle lemon. He wore a suit now. A name tag on his lapel said: Nahom: Guest Relations. His smile, which used to be a careful act of defiance, was now a measured offer of service. And sometimes it was returned, surprisingly and wonderfully. A guest would look him in the eye and smile back, a simple exchange of human recognition that felt, each time, like a small miracle.

On his days off, he learned to walk without going anywhere specific. He found the paths by the Elbow River, now free from its ice shell. It flowed with power, full of silt, like a brown muscle moving through the city. He took a bus to Banff, and when he first saw the turquoise lakes, nestled in mountains topped with snow, he held his breath. The water was a colour he couldn't name. It was a bright, unbelievable blue-green that seemed to hum against the rocks. His mother's old saying came to mind: The sky is the same everywhere. For the first time, he let himself disagree. This sky, holding this water, felt not uncaring, but welcoming.

His English classes had ended, but his friendship with Ali had grown into something quiet and truly important. They met every week now, not in classrooms, but by the river.

Ali, too, seemed a bit different. The tired shadows under his eyes were still there, but a new, soft light shone within him. His part-time literature class was like digging for treasure. He talked about metaphors not just as things writers use, but as something we need psychologically: a way to add meaning to things that are too hard to deal with. He was writing poems, getting them published in small magazines. His poems, Nahom thought, were like Ali himself: a calm surface covering a deep, strong current.

One afternoon in late April, they walked a wooded path by the river. The air smelled strongly of wet pine and thawing mud.

"It's like the city is taking its first full breath," Nahom said, watching two geese lead their little family through the water.

"It's something that happens every year, an act of trust," Ali replied, his hands in his corduroy pockets. "The belief that life will come back, even when everything suggests it won't."

They walked in comfortable silence under the bare branches of cottonwood trees before Nahom spoke, his words feeling important in the open air. "The papers came yesterday. Permanent residency. It's official."

Ali stopped. His smile was instant, warm, and open. "This isn't just a door, Nahom. This is a foundation. Now you can build something."

"I've already started." From his inside pocket, Nahom took out a cream-coloured envelope, smooth and cool. "The sponsorship papers. For her. They're ready to send."

Ali took the envelope, feeling its weight, both real and symbolic. "Hermela."

"Yes." Nahom watched a drifting branch on the brown water. "For so long, she was just a memory. A photo. A voice breaking up on a bad phone line. Now… she's becoming a possibility. Breathing the same air."

"Describe her to me," Ali said, not like a teacher testing vocabulary, but like a poet looking for an image.

Nahom closed his eyes. The distant city hum faded. He didn't see her face first; he felt something—a warmth in the middle of his chest.

"She's not a quiet kind of love," he began, his voice softening, becoming a private rhythm. "She's not… calm. She's like a sunrise over the mountains, sudden and all-encompassing. Her laugh doesn't just make a sound; it unfolds like a big leaf opening after a long rain." He opened his eyes, meeting Ali's watchful gaze. "When I think of her, I feel a special warmth. Like a stone that's been in the sun all day, soaking up heat. In the camps, in that cold basement, I'd close my eyes and feel that stone's heat in my hand. Her presence. This love… it's not a way I built to get away from loneliness. It's the solid ground I found I could stand on."

Ali nodded slowly, like someone writing down something sacred. "You've been writing."

"In a notebook. The sentences are clunky. Not good enough for such a feeling. But I fill them anyway."

"Good," Ali said, carefully handing the envelope back. "That's the real task. To build a boat out of words." His tone changed, becoming more down-to-earth. "And the job? Will it keep this boat afloat?"

"The hotel is good. The people are… polite." He had learned the wide range of what that Canadian word meant. "It's a performance, but one done with honour. I can save money. I can provide."

"Then you're doing what I couldn't," Ali said, so softly the words were almost lost in the river's sound.

Nahom looked at him, things falling into place. "Your story. The man on the river, and the girl in the boat. That wasn't just a made-up lesson."

Ali kept looking at the water, as if searching for his own reflection and finding only the moving, murky brown. "It is a story," he admitted, then let out a long sigh that seemed to hold years. "Some loves are like epic poems. Others are like haikus, short, incredibly perfect, and then they're gone. Leaving a silence so big it becomes its own thing. My poetry is the echo in that silence. Yours…" He pointed to the envelope in Nahom's hand. "Yours has the chance to be the story that keeps going."

They started walking again. A kingfisher dove, a blue flash of determination, and came up with a silver fish wiggling in its beak.

"I'm scared," Nahom admitted, the confession raw. "Scared the man who lived through it, the butcher, the refugee, isn't good enough for the boy she remembers." That Canada has smoothed me down into something I don't recognise, something less."

"You're not strange. You're experienced," Ali said, the word firm, definite. "She will love the man who fought his demons and now walks here, planting seeds in new ground. That's the man you need to invite. Not the memory. The real person."

The invitation went out. His days became a patient construction of waiting. He worked his shifts with a new, focused goal. He met Ali by the river, and their talks now went from everyday stuff to big philosophical ideas, always with the water watching.

One evening in May, with the light staying late in a long, golden sigh, they sat on their usual bench. The river was high, loud with the memory of mountain snow.

"I have a title for my new collection," Ali said, breaking a comfortable silence. "The Sky Left Behind."

The words struck Nahom deep. It was the unspoken title of his own life. "It's perfect."

"It's thanks to you," Ali said. He pulled a small, respected literary journal from his bag. "The first published poem from it. Read it."

Nahom took the journal carefully. The poem was called A Blessing for a New Name. His eyes found the last lines:

And let the new name be not a label, but a breath,
Not a mark on a paper, but a warm stone in the hand,
Warmed by a sun that is, finally, not borrowed,
But truly believed in.

He looked up, his vision blurry. "You wrote this for me."

"I wrote it because of you," Ali gently corrected, placing a hand on his shoulder. "There's a difference."

The next weekend, Ali rented a car. "Enough of the city's river, with its sewer outlets and bike bells. Let me show you the one you see on postcards."

The turquoise of Lake Louise wasn't just a colour. It was an event. It held a silence so deep it felt like pressure on your eardrums. They stood on the rocky shore, the Victoria Glacier a huge, crinkled scroll of old ice. A chipmunk scurried, a quick, grounding flash of life in the magnificent scenery.

"It's like God spilled a jewel and forgot to clean it up," Nahom whispered. In his mind, he was already failing to describe it in a letter to Hermela, his words falling short of the reality.

Ali was quiet for a long time, his eyes fixed not on the water, but on a single, twisted pine clinging to a steep cliff. "It makes your heart ache, doesn't it?"

he finally said. "Not with sadness, but with a longing for a purity you feel you've already ruined."

Nahom glanced at him, the cold of the mountain rock seeping through the soles of his shoes. "Ruined? How can you ruin a lake?"

"Not the lake," Ali said. He skipped a flat stone; it bounced three times and disappeared. "It reminds me of the poets. Keats and his urn. Wordsworth and his cloud. Your Hermela… you're building a boat of real wood and legal papers to bring her here, to this real world. That's brave. But my mind… it gets stuck in the harbour, always admiring the idea of the sea."

He sat on a warm boulder, his confession flowing as naturally as the melting snow.

"I'm in love," Ali declared, not to Nahom, but to the lake, the glacier, the uncaring sky. "I'm in love with the way poets have loved. With the ancient Greek jar's frozen beauty. With the lonely cloud's grand romance. I'm so in love with the idea of love that I'm terrified to ruin it with real life. Could something so delicate last through grocery lists and tired sighs? I want a love no single, imperfect, person could ever give."

Nahom listened, the huge space around them making Ali's openness feel both enormous and small.

"These poets," Ali went on, his voice passionate now, "they made love spiritual, independent, timeless. And our world has turned it into a deal. A math problem of how well you fit, shared goals, money security. I don't know which version to believe." He looked at his hands, then back at the incredible water. "For me, the idea is etched here," he tapped his temple, "not here." He touched his chest. "I can't stop analysing. Should I let go of the dream? Or ignore reality? Or just admit that I'm not fit for the everyday mess of it?"

"What's the other option?" Nahom asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"The other option," Ali said, the word hanging in the thin, bright air, "is to not settle. I'd rather have nothing than something fake. People aren't Love itself. They can only give love, a love always coloured by their own pasts, their fears, their humanity. What I want is Love in its pure, abstract, perfect form. Unreachable. And yet…" He nodded toward the glowing water, "it feels so close in places like this. I'm in love with love itself. And I wouldn't settle for any of its close relatives."

A gust of wind ruffled the lake's surface, breaking the perfect reflection into a million shimmering pieces. The ideal was gone, replaced by a lively, complicated beauty.

"The lake is still there," Nahom said after a moment. "It's even more alive now. It's not just a picture."

Ali followed his gaze. He watched the light dance on the ripples, a chaotic, stunning show. He took a deep, careful breath, as if breathing in the broken reflection.

"You're building your boat out of real wood, Nahom," Ali said, standing and brushing dirt from his pants. "I've been trying to build mine out of the reflection." He managed a small, modest smile. "Maybe it's time to get my hands wet."

Driving home, the sky streaked with the long, sad colours of twilight, Nahom felt a deep sense of peace. The flowing river of his new life, Ali's steady friendship, and the promise of Hermela formed a future vibrating across the distance like a plucked string. This was the Canada he was carefully putting together: not the advertised dream, nor the cold indifference, but this delicate, hard-won world of human ties; this persistent beauty growing in the cracks of a broken past.

He was no longer just under the sky, begging to belong. He was part of its atmosphere. The wait for Hermela was no longer like a jail sentence. It had

become a room before the main one, and for the first time, he could hear, faint yet distinct, from the other side of the door the small music of a future being arranged: a chair scraping, a window creaking open to fresh air, a breath held not in fear, but in quiet greeting.

He was ready.

CHAPTER 6 – WHAT LOVE TOOK AWAY

For thirty days, everything felt up in the air; it was all what if and when will it happen. Then she showed up, and suddenly, everything was real.

Hermela walked through the airport doors, and the loud airport sounds faded into a soft, faraway hum: the screeching carts, the crackly announcements, all dimmed into the distance. Nahom just stood there, completely still. She didn't look like her picture. The photo was a simple promise; she was a complicated reality. She was taller, stood up straight in a way that showed she was tough, and wore a dark wool coat that reached her knees. Her face had that serious look he knew, but time had made it sharper, defining her jawline more.

Her dark, black eyes held his for a fleeting instant. In that shared, suspended breath, the vast distance between them vanished, as if the world had folded itself in silence.

Then she smiled. It was just like he'd told Ali: sudden and all-encompassing, like a sunrise. It made her shine from the inside. But he saw it happen. He saw the effort it took, how it didn't quite reach her tense shoulders. And just as fast, he saw it fade. Not disappear, but pull back, leaving a polite, distant warmth in its place, the kind you give to a helpful stranger. A quick flash in her eyes, a split-second thought. He desperately tried to convince himself it was just tiredness.

He didn't kiss her. The urge was strong, a jolt through him, but her hesitation was a wall he couldn't get past. Instead, he stepped closer and rested his forehead against hers. It was a classic move, one from tradition. Warm dust, old incense, and the faint, aching perfume of rain-warmed earth

wrapped around him. For a single, staggering moment, the world shifted: Canadian concrete became the soil of memory, of home.

"You're here," he whispered, the words tasting like dust and a miracle.

"You brought me," she replied. Her voice was quiet, careful. He felt it vibrate through her skull more than heard it. She didn't lean into him; she simply let him touch her.

He had set the scene for their beginning. His studio apartment was filled with light on purpose, the window showing a changing view of the Elbow River. He'd painted the walls a soft, creamy yellow—the colour of morning hope. The bed had fresh, white sheets. He watched her take it all in. She didn't go to the middle of the room, but walked around the edges, her fingers touching the wall, the table, the back of a chair, as if checking if things were real.

He pointed to the small back room, where a single bed was neatly made. "Until the wedding," he said, his voice softer than he meant it to be. "Two months. We'll do this the right way."

She nodded, looking at the smooth, fake wood of the kitchen table. "Yes. The right way." Her fingers traced a flaw in the fake wood, going over it again and again.

Days settled into a calm routine. He went to the hotel feeling a new, almost fragile lightness. At night, they did a quiet dance of living together. She chopped vegetables with a focused, precise care that seemed more about being in control than actually cooking. One night, the knife slipped. A sharp, quick gasp. A perfect drop of red appeared on her fingertip.

He was next to her right away. "Let me see."

"It's nothing," she said, pulling her hand away so fast she almost tripped. It wasn't pain that made her pull back. It was him.

He softened his voice. "Hermela. Please."

She gave in, holding out her hand, palm up, a reluctant offering. He led her to the sink, her warm skin feeling surprisingly hot against his. He ran cool water over the small cut, wrapping it in a bandage with a gentleness that even he thought was a bit much. For a moment, she watched his hands, her face unreadable. Not grateful. Just watching closely.

"Thank you," she said, pulling her hand away the second he finished. She immediately turned back to the cutting board, her shoulders stiff. He would remember that flinch long after the cut healed.

By day, she went to language classes. At night, he taught her. In Tigrinya, their words flowed easily. But when he switched to English, she'd become quiet, her silence a loaded thing. He'd point to something. "This is a cup." She'd repeat the word perfectly, but her eyes would be on the window, on the huge, darkening prairie sky.

"This country is very big," she said one evening, choosing her English words carefully. "It makes a person feel… small."

"We're not small," he replied, reaching for her hand across the table. "We're together."

She let him take her hand, but her fingers stayed loose in his. "Yes," she said, looking at their joined hands as if they belonged to two other people. The word fell between them like a stone into a deep, cold well, swallowed without a ripple.

The envelope arrived on a Tuesday. From the government. Seemingly harmless, but hinting at something important.

She turned it over in her hands, her thumb tracing the raised letters of her name like she was reading Braille. When she opened it, he watched her back muscles tighten slightly.

"Permanent residency," she stated, putting the letter on the table. The words held no excitement, no sigh of relief. They were the sound of a lock clicking shut.

A date was picked. A Monday in June. The wedding was set.

He found her one evening staring into the dark, shiny glass of the oven door. Her own face looked back, blurry and doubled.

"What is it?" he asked softly from the doorway.

She jumped, a hand flying to her throat. "Nothing," she said, her voice quiet. "Just thinking." She wouldn't meet his eyes, not even in the reflection.

Spring, no longer shy, came in with a confident, green burst. Nahom finished his morning job, bought a small carton of blueberries—she'd mentioned liking them weeks ago—and walked home under a perfectly blue sky. He turned the key, her name already a sweet thought in his mind.

The silence hit him first. Not her thoughtful, quiet hum. This was emptiness. The air in the room was stale, still, as if it had been holding its breath for a long time and finally gave up.

"Hermela?"

The envelope sat on the table, a plain white rectangle leaning against the wooden fruit bowl he'd bought for her. His name was on the front.

His legs felt wobbly. He sat down. The carton slipped from his numb fingers. Blueberries scattered like tiny, purple marbles across the floor, rolling into the corners of the life he thought he'd built. He opened the letter.

Nahom,

I've left. Please don't try to find me.

I'm writing because you deserve the truth...

The words blurred. The paper felt impossibly heavy in his hands. He read the name, Kibrom, and a sound escaped him, low and animal, thick with disbelief. He absorbed the words about the bridge, the shame, the life that had never belonged to her. Each sentence was a careful, precise cut.

I'm with him now.

The paper floated from his fingers. The world didn't end; it just stopped moving forward. All drive left him. He was a boat lost at sea, every anchor cut. Ali's voice popped into his head: *Some love stories are quick breaths—short, complete, and gone.*

Outside, a sparrow dragged a twig towards an unfinished nest. The Elbow River rushed on, full of melting ice, completely uncaring. He didn't cry. The feeling was too big, too deep for tears. It was like a geological shift, a continent inside him breaking apart, silently, in the dark.

Days blended together. He missed a shift. A polite, sorry call from the hotel. His suit hung in the closet, like a ghost. Money got thin. He walked the streets, a phantom haunting his own life.

One night, driven by a need to feel anything besides this huge emptiness, he found a name online: Linda. The description was short, business-like. No big promises. Just a statement of what she offered.

Her apartment was in a building that had seen better days. Inside, the walls were covered in books. The air smelled of sandalwood and strong black tea. Linda opened the door wearing a simple green dress. Her beauty was clear and sharp. Her eyes watched; they didn't put on a show.

Standing before her, he felt like an old, tired soldier walking into a quiet, serious church.

"You look lost," she said. An observation, not an invitation. "Sit."

Steam rose from two cups of tea, a fragrant wall between them. Her silence was like architecture, a space he could fill or not.

"She left," he said, the words tasting like ash in his mouth.

Linda listened, her gaze steady. When she spoke, her words were sharp. "You loved what you wished for. Not what was really there." The truth hit him with clean, brutal accuracy. "Desire is the best editor in the world. It cuts out everything that doesn't fit the picture."

He went back. He talked about Hermela's silences, her flinching, the way she looked at the river as if it were a road. Linda listened.

"Truth doesn't rush," she said one night. "It waits to be noticed. Illusions rush to please."

Only then did she talk about the cost. An hour of clear presence. A deal. He understood. It was a language he could now grasp: clear limits, plain expectations. He stayed.

Her touch wasn't comfort, but a lesson in being present. With Linda, the future dissolved, and stories fell away. There was only that hour, the body burning and shivering with warmth, nerves, and breath, a fleeting anchor in the rushing tide of everything else.

When his money ran out, she gathered the last crumpled bills. Then, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his forehead. It wasn't affection. It was a final mark.

"She took your future," Linda said quietly. "Don't let her take your past too." She paused at the doorway. "Build your life again, Nahom. Nothing is free. Not even sadness."

Outside, the Elbow River rushed under the bridge. Nahom leaned on the cold iron railing, the city lights shimmering on the dark, moving water. The dizziness hit him then. He hadn't fallen for a woman. He had fallen for a

story he made up himself. He had built a temple for a god who was never there.

In his pocket, his phone vibrated. A familiar pattern. Ali. Again.

He let it ring, the sound a tiny, nagging insect against the river's massive song. He listened. To the water. To the emptiness. To the first, faint, scary sound of his own breathing, in and out—the only proof that he was still here.

CHAPTER 7 – THE GEOLOGY OF GRIEF

The city didn’t even notice his breakdown. Calgary was showing off its summer best, all green everywhere against a big, uncaring blue sky. The Bow River rushed by, happy and gurgling. Dandelion fluff floated on the warm air. Geese honked, chatting away like old neighbors, their fuzzy babies swimming in perfect lines. Nahom moved through it all like a ghost, a hole in the bright, noisy air. Everything was so bright, and each bright thing felt like a pinprick: the yellow of a weed reminded him of the yellow walls he’d painted for her; the geese in pairs mocked his loneliness; the river’s sound was like a promise made to thin air, now broken.

His last few bucks were sweaty in his pocket. He followed the city’s quiet undernote, past glass and traffic, until it carried him behind the bus station. Sunlight pooled on concrete and failed to heat it. Paint peeled. Shadows lingered. The place felt like a sentence left unfinished.

That’s where he saw them. A small group of people, just drifting. Their bodies swung like pendulums to a silent, off-beat rhythm. They’d bounce with a weird, floaty energy, then lean sideways like private gusts of wind were hitting them. Not people, really, but leaves caught in an updraft—not flying, but stuck in a cruel, still kind of mercy. Nahom watched, hypnotized.

This wasn’t dancing. It was their bodies’ last, desperate fight with gravity, a silent play about trying to get away.

A young woman broke away from the group. Her hair was black as a crow’s wing, with streaks of coppery red that stood out. Her eyes, when they met his, were huge and hazy. Like windows to a room where a fire had burned down to cold, perfect ash.

“Hey,” she said, her voice a tired whisper over rough ground. “Are you sick of this damn world yet?”

The question was huge, like one word covering whole continents of disappointment. “Yes.” The word was like a rock dropped from high up, and under it scrambled the memory of a different “yes”—said softly in a sunny room, a promise that turned out to be like a loan with really harsh interest.

“Life’s eating you. People want to take a bite out of you. And you look at us and think, ‘They found the way out.’” A dry laugh. No humor in it. Just the sound of a door slamming shut. “You think we’re gone.”

He nodded, a stiff, mechanical jerk of his chin.

“Then this,” she said, pointing to her shaky arms, to the swaying figures behind her, “this is the magic. And you can’t do it.” She looked him over, like a botanist checking out a sick plant. “You’re still trying to stand on solid ground.”

A wild, desperate hope sparked in his chest, not for happiness, but for everything to just stop. A quiet break in the loud, constant story in his head. A silence where Hermela’s name wouldn’t echo like a ghost in an empty church. “I want to learn this magic.”

“It’s not learning,” she corrected, her voice suddenly gentle, almost motherly. “It’s taking.” From a small bag, she pulled a piece of tinfoil,

wrinkled and dull under the summer sun. She tapped it with her finger. A thin line of fine, off-white powder. It caught the light like crushed bone. “You have to leave. This is your ticket.”

He didn’t think twice. He bent his head, like someone praying at a dark altar, and breathed it in.

The world slowly fell apart.

First, sound: the traffic, far-off shouts, the city’s low hum—all blended into one soft sound, like a singing bowl filling his head. Hermela’s voice, saying his name, then fading into gentle static.

Then, sight: the sharp edges of buildings blurred, ran like wet ink. The clear, neat lines of her letter on the table, the black on white that ended everything, softened into a harmless gray smudge.

The ground under his feet wasn’t solid anymore; it felt like a gentle swell, the deck of a ship on a calm, endless ocean. His back softened like a reed. His head, too heavy for memories or predictions, just rolled forward.

He started to sway. A deep, ocean-like roll. Back. Forth. A pendulum marking time that had stopped.

Quick image: Not the scary meat hook from his father’s stories, but her braid, swinging gently as she turned away at the airport, a movement he’d played over and over until it felt like a warning.

Quick image: Not Linda’s green dress, but the empty spot on the mattress where Hermela had never really slept.

Quick image: His mother’s finger, pointing to a pale, harsh sky. The sky was the same. But it wasn’t. The sky here had seen his ruin and stayed completely, insultingly calm.

His arms hung loose, fingers touching the sun-warmed concrete. He was awake, but completely absent. The pain softened into blurry, sentimental

shapes like old photos left in the rain. The picture of her on his phone, fading into harmless digital fuzz. He was just breath. Rhythm. Nothing.

A jolt—his knee buckled. The concrete rushed up to meet him, then held him in a soft, mocking hug. He giggled, a sound he didn’t recognize as his own. The girl’s face loomed over him, doubled, like two moons with dark holes for eyes. “Traveling?” she asked. Her voice echoed down a long, tin pipe.

He tried to nod and tipped sideways. Her hand caught his arm. Fingernails bitten to the quick. Pain snapped him still. For a second, it was Hermela at the curb in a dream of hate. Then it slipped away.

He came back to himself slowly. The light in his head was thin and gray. Pain arrived first, a dull complaint in his lower back, a tingling heat along his neck where the sun had worked on him. His sweat smelled sour, cutting through the chemical sweetness in his nose. Beneath it lingered warm dust and incense. Her scent. Still there, quietly running the machine.

The girl watched him, a curious smile on her chapped lips. “You went pretty far.”

He really had. And on that trip, he’d shed his past like old skin. But some skins are stuck on; the scar of her leaving wasn’t just a layer to be peeled off, but a change in his very flesh. A deep indifference settled over him. No fear. No future. The past was a country whose border had been sealed. He now owned his own brokenness.

He followed her. Her steps were light, weaving. He just followed. There was nowhere else to go. This, by itself, was a choice.

The C-Train was a bright, rumbling snake swallowing them whole. They got on, and the city unrolled outside the windows—tall buildings, green parks,

houses with neat lawns—all seen with the coldness of a dethroned god. It was all there for him to see, and it all meant nothing.

He turned to her. “Where are we going?”

“I’m going home. I don’t know about you.”

Her words cut through the lingering haze. “I don’t have a home.” The words were more true than he meant. He’d built one, but a home needs a shared story. His had been a one-man show in an empty theater.

She glanced at him, sizing him up. “Okay then. Come to my place. It’s big enough to give you room.”

“Where is your home?”

“You’ll see soon.” She leaned against the window, her reflection a ghost over the sunny neighborhoods.

He put a hand on her shoulder. Testing if she was real. The last shoulder he’d touched with such careful hope was hers, that first night in the yellow room, when everything still seemed possible. “What’s your name?”

She didn’t tense up. She leaned into his touch, letting her head rest. Turned. Looked up. Her eyes were dark, ancient pools.

“Mika Siksika,” she said. “Owner of this land.”

The word landed. A heavy thump. “Owner?”

“Yeah. We got here about twelve thousand years ago. Give or take.”

“Indigenous?” He felt awkward. A textbook word.

A flicker—amusement, anger. “Oh, you know about us?”

“A little. I studied… in my English class.”

“Oh yeah.” A sigh like wind through tall grass. “The owners of this beautiful land. Now living on the scraps.”

The drug had stripped away his politeness, leaving only raw memories. His own pain was a sudden key fitting into a familiar lock. “I know. The children… taken from their mothers. Carried into quiet schools where their voices were silenced.” He thought of his own separation, not from land, but from a future that had been promised in a look, in a letter. A different kind of theft, but theft all the same.

Mika’s eyes closed. A long moment. When they opened, they had a layer of centuries-old pain. “And their songs forbidden,” she whispered. Her hand found his, gripped it. Her palm was rough, warm. A working hand. It wasn’t Hermela’s hand, which had been soft, slow to hold his. This grip was direct, a shared weight between survivors.

The train rattled on. Nahom’s mind brought up Ali’s lessons as felt truths. “The land that used to give life to your people… fenced off. Taken by strangers. Ghosts of rivers left behind.”

She nodded, her thumb gently stroking the back of his hand. An unexpected comforting gesture. “The plains and rivers that sang to our ancestors… cut up into fences and roads. Holy places went silent. Strangers walked where the buffalo once roamed.” She squeezed. “You know a lot, for someone new here.”

“My teacher, Ali… he loved your culture. He taught us it was a story of belonging, before it was a story of loss.” He didn’t say: And I loved a woman. I built a belonging. And now that, too, is a story of loss. The pattern is the same.

“Ali?” she asked softly. “I asked yours.”

“Nahom. From Eritrea.”

“Okay, Nahom from Eritrea.” A challenge. An offer. “Tell me more about us.”

Images came to mind, sharp and awful. “The boarding schools… those old buildings. They stand in silence. Their walls hold whispers. Halls holding generations of fear.”

Mika turned to the window but saw a different landscape. Her voice dropped, became steady, almost like a chant. “The floors remember tiny footsteps that trembled. The shadows in the corners… they’re not empty. They’re full of the love that wasn’t allowed to grow there.” She took a sharp breath, as if the air in the train had gotten thin. “The hidden sadness. The stolen childhoods. The songs… silenced before they were even sung.”

Nahom felt a pressure in his own chest. A memory not of a school, but of an airport, of a stillness so complete it felt like a theft. The future he’d held, stolen not by an institution, but by a truth. The song of ‘us’ silenced before it found its verse. He said nothing, just let the shared air hold both their ghosts.

“Underneath those schools,” Mika went on, her words now like stones dropping into a deep well, “the earth holds them. Not just songs. Not just laughter.” She looked back at him, her gaze devastatingly direct. “Their bodies remember. Their skin remembers the touch that wasn’t love. The heart… the heart keeps score. Long after the lips are sealed shut.” She swallowed, the sound clear over the train’s rumble. “My grandma… she was in one of those schools. Before she died, her last words were, ‘I want to give back this shame.’” A single tear tracked a path through the fine dust on her cheek. She didn’t wipe it away. “How do you give back a shame that’s been carved into your bones?”

How do you give back a love that has fused with your very being? Nahom had no answer for her, or for himself. Only a shared silence heavier than words, a realization that some wounds become part of who you are.

The train announced the last stop. They came out into the long summer evening, at the city's rough edge where concrete gave way to wild grasses, lush poplar and spruce trees. The skyline was now a faraway cluster of glowing lights against a peach and lavender sky—beautiful, but belonging to another world.

"This way." Mika led him off the paved path. The air changed right away—rich with warm dirt, sap, pollen, the fresh, clean smell of the nearby Bow River. The city's electronic hum faded, replaced by insect buzz, cricket chirps, the steady, comforting rush of water.

"This," she said, waving her arm to include the river, trees, the darkening sky, "is my home. Has been for twelve thousand years."

They stood on the bank. The Bow here was wide, generous, its surface dotted with the last golden light of sunset. It spoke in a voice of steady, strong flow—a liquid conversation with rocks and roots that was here before anyone even named this place. A family of geese glided in a quiet backwater, goslings peeping softly. Abundant, forever life.

Mika knelt. Dipped her fingers in the fast, sun-touched water. Brought them to her forehead—a memory baptism. "The river's voice whispers stories I can almost remember," she said, more to the water than to him. "Buffalo on the plains. Tipis on the hills. Ancestors… their footsteps are still here. In the shaky feeling under the soil." The warm wind lifted her hair. "You feel them in the wind. Songs. Laughter. A presence. Even when the city acts like you're not there, the river connects. To strength. To bouncing back. To a history that can't be wiped out. Only ignored."

Nahom stood beside her, the drug-induced bravery gone, only tired clarity left. He saw not a homeless girl and a broken man, but two exiles on a green, disputed shore. Her feeling of being out of place was in the soil, deep and from her ancestors. His was in his spirit, fresh and bleeding. His, a fresh hole where a promised life had been completely ripped from the earth.

Both were like refugees from a promised future, meeting here where the river curved and the city’s hold became weak.

The river didn’t care. It was the only real resident here, flowing from ancient ice to a distant sea, carrying mountain memories and the smell of pine, uncaring about flags or broken hearts. It had flowed past the window of the yellow room. It would flow past whatever came next. The geese honked, settling down for the night. Their world was complete and whole.

Mika got up, brushing dirt from her knees. She pointed to a lean-to hidden almost perfectly among cottonwood trees—recycled plywood, faded tarps, woven into the greenery with a kind of sacred practicality. It faced the water.

“You can stay tonight,” she said. “It’s not much. But it’s dry. And it listens.”

Nahom looked from the flimsy shelter to the endless river, from the woman whose home was stolen to the sky that had seen every theft. The sky his mother said was the same everywhere. Here, under its soft, star-dusted blanket, beside a river that sang an older, lasting song, he felt the terrible, beautiful foundation of his existence.

He couldn’t fall any further. The hurt from Hermela wasn't gone. It was now part of the landscape. A layer in the history of his life, solid and real as stone.

He made a choice then, small but his own. He would stay.

The huge, generous sky was no longer above him. He was inside it. And inside it, for this one night, with the summer river murmuring its ancient, patient story into the dark, he wasn’t alone.

“Thank you, Mika Siksika,” he said, a quiet promise to the coming dark.

The river flowed on. Sound of time. Loss. Life stubbornly continuing. Sound of the sky, left behind and forever remembered, written in water on the earth’s skin.

And for now, in the middle of the green, alive summer, it was enough. The geese fell silent. The river was the only one speaking. And it spoke of what stays, long after everything else is washed away.

Even love, it seemed to say. Especially love.

Chapter 8: THE RIVER’S TRUE DAUGHTER

Before Nahom, the riverbend was Mika’s territory. Every morning, she’d walk along the water’s edge, not really looking for stuff, but more like picking out treasures. She’d grab whatever the current brought: a smooth rock, a seagull feather, a soggy book. These were her special collection. She believed her job was to see what the river remembered and keep its stories safe for someone who might need them later—maybe a traveler whose own past had been washed away. She was like a librarian for lost things, long before Nahom showed up and became her most interesting book.

Now, the river just accepted them, no big deal. Nahom’s new life with Mika happened in that in-between spot, caught somewhere between the city’s buzz and the river’s older, softer voice. Their home was a lean-to, a flimsy structure made of leftover wood and faded blue tarps, facing the river’s bend like a humble listener to an endless tale. They lived by the rules of just getting by, where time wasn't about hours, but about how empty their stomachs were and the sun making its slow trip across the sky above the cottonwood trees.

Food was all about things going bad and handouts. Twice a week, they slipped into the silent line at the food bank, where the air smelled of cardboard and the sad sweetness of overripe fruit. In this place, Canada’s plenty brushed up against its limits, a quiet reckoning of what was given and what rotted away. Volunteers would give them cardboard boxes filled with the edible leftovers: dented cans with faded labels, bananas spotted like old paper, loaves of bread growing tiny blue mold forests.

Afterward, Mika would sit by the riverbank, her small knife glinting in the sun as she cut away the soft, dark parts. She was super careful, revealing the firm, still-pale fruit underneath. Nahom watched her hands; how precise

she was. "It's like archaeology," she said once, not looking up. "You have to respect what's spoiled to find what's still good." She handed him a clean slice of apple. The sweetness on his tongue felt like a secret he shouldn't know.

Money was for other stuff. For the powder that made Mika light and floaty, like she was dancing. For the markers to make their sign: HOMELESS, HUNGRY, HAUNTED—your help keeps the world breathing. They took their turns at the traffic lights, the cardboard sign trembling in their hands, while the river of eyes flowed past, sometimes brushing against them like a ghost, sometimes piercing through, leaving only a fleeting echo before the light changed. The coins and the occasional dollar bill went into an old coffee tin, a little stash of their invisible lives.

But Mika’s real treasure was on the saggy shelf she’d put together from a plank and some river stones. Books bought for cheap at the thrift store, each one showing signs of previous owners: For Mary, Grade 4!, J. Peterson 1972, This Book Belongs to The Calgary Public Library. Her schooling was this mix of forgotten knowledge. Mysticism had become her haze, a soft labyrinth of water-stained Sufi poems, Zen aphorisms suspended like motes of light, and the Kabbalah’s secret geometries shimmering at the edges of thought.

"Your body is like a library," she told him one afternoon, her finger tracing a crack in a leather book cover. "Your soul is the story that keeps getting checked out."

At night, with the river playing its endless, changing song, she would turn to him. "What's bothering you tonight, Nahom?"

And under a sky packed with so many stars it looked like a solid, holey blanket, he spoke. He spoke of Hermela, not as a betrayal but like a shifting climate, her presence a sun that lingered and her absence a wind that reshaped the seasons of his heart. He talked until his voice was rough, until

the story wasn't inside him anymore, but just hanging in the air between them.

Mika listened, her eyes reflecting the cold shine of the Milky Way. When he finished, she was quiet for a long time, just watching the stars spread out.

"We go around each other," she said finally, her voice blending with the river’s sound. "Sometimes for a short time. Sometimes for all our lives. Sometimes things fall apart, and someone turns into a shooting star, brilliant and fleeting, gone before you can hold them." She turned to him. "Your love finished its path. That doesn't mean it failed. That means it was special."

He leaned over and kissed her closed eyelids, one after the other, like a blessing. "How do you know this stuff?"

She opened her eyes. "The books show me the directions. The river teaches me how things flow."

Later, she reached for him. When they came together, it wasn't a big fire, but more like two streams meeting up, no fighting to see who was stronger, just a mix of their currents. There was no guilt, because guilt is about human rules, and their church was the open sky. No sin, because sin is a story told in stone buildings, and their scripture was just breathing and touching and the river's steady sound. It was beautiful in how simple it was. It just *was*.

Afterward, they lay tangled up, their skin cooling in the night air. Nahom drifted into a state where he felt like his body and the earth were barely separate.

A voice that wasn't Mika's pulled him back.

A deep, rumbling hum, like rocks grinding together underwater. He opened his eyes. The embers of their small fire glowed like a slow heartbeat. In

their dim light, he saw Mika sitting up, cross-legged, facing the darkness. And he saw a shadow.

Not just a lack of light, but a dense darkness, a darker dark shaped like a man, flowing with edges that shimmered as if seen through heated air. The air got cold where it stood.

"Oki," Mika said, like she was just chatting. "I'm tired of this body. Can't I just step through?"

The shadow shifted and rippled. A voice rose inside Nahom, bypassing his ears entirely, resonating through stone and soil, earth and bone. *No, little sister. The ones who force the door… their souls break apart. Like clay pots dropped before baking. They spend forever trying to keep their own pieces together.*

Nahom shivered hard. His teeth chattered. The shadow’s attention, a feeling like a hand on his chest, turned to him. For a second, Nahom felt completely seen, right down to his bones. Then the shadow disappeared, dissolving back into the night.

Mika turned, not looking worried at all. She found their water bottle and pressed the cool plastic to his lips. "You saw him."

"A ghost," Nahom stammered.

"A friend," she corrected, wiping his forehead with her sleeve. "Oki. His people camped here when the ice was still melting. He stays." She kissed his temple. "Souls have their own land, right next to ours. Most of the time, the lines hold. But sometimes, when I remember the old songs clearly… the door cracks open."

"How long…"

"Seven thousand winters," she said, as casually as if she were telling him the time. She picked up a stone, turning it in her hand. "If you're quiet inside, you could meet him. He likes new stories."

Nahom spent the next day feeling totally amazed. The solid world, the sun on the water, the bread, the feel of tree bark, seemed like a thin page covering a vast book. Every bird call felt as if it might carry a message.

When night came, thick with stars, his fear had changed into a need as basic as hunger. They lay on their blankets. "Ready?" Mika asked.

He nodded.

She didn't chant. She just closed her eyes, and her breathing settled into the river’s rhythm. The air grew still, heavy. Then the cool spot took shape, becoming solid, and Oki stood there, a quiet shadow framed by the vast, starry sky.

You have questions, salt-water man.

The voice vibrated in Nahom’s bones. "Where do souls live?"

In the memory of the world, Oki spoke. Your memory, the shadowy arm reaching toward Nahom’s head, glows small, bright, and burning. A candle. When you cross over, most people blow theirs out. They dissolve into the vast, cooler memory of the world, flowing into the stone’s quiet knowing, the river’s endless murmur, the wind’s wandering song. They forget the 'you' you are now. A pause like holding your breath. *But some of us… we miss the candle’s heat. The taste of cold water. The weight of a hand. We find the thin spots, the cracks between worlds, and we slip back through to watch. But we are like reflections. We can’t hold anything.*

Mika stirred beside him, her hand finding his in the dark. Her fingers were warm, alive.

"Have you met God?" Nahom whispered.

The shadow rippled—amused, or maybe just very old. *We are still waiting for God. We have been waiting since I first woke up on the other side.*

"For seven thousand years?"

Time is a river on your side, Oki replied. *On ours, it’s the riverbed. We are the stones. Since we chose to remember, to crawl back through the cracks… we forgot the way to the deep quiet. We live in the shallow parts now. A friend once saw a little bit of where it all started. He said it looked like his mother’s face when he was small and lost.*

Nahom felt the truth of this in his body—an actual ache behind his ribs.

"And love?" The word left him feeling exposed. "What is it, there? Here?"

Love is a rule, Oki’s voice hummed. *Like gravity. You don't ask the river to be loyal; you just feel it pulling you.* The shadow seemed to move, to feel more real. *The one pushed from the triangle… you see him as the loser. But he is the free one. The other two are now stuck in their own human flaws. They will try to control what can’t be controlled. They will scratch the surface while the deep flow runs wild beneath them.*

Nahom let out a shaky breath. The story he had carried, of betrayal and of longing, dissolved into silence, leaving only the bare, trembling pulse of the experience itself.

Even pain gives off light, Oki continued, softer now. *Breaking, losing, wanting—these are ways of paying attention. They show you parts of yourself that comfort never reaches. Love hurts. Love destroys. And yet…* The voice almost faded away. *It makes worlds where there was only empty space.*

They talked of memory, not as looking back, but as the pull of unseen gravity, a subtle shaping of time, a bending of moments into a quiet architecture. About desire as dark matter, invisible but shaping everything

the heart does. Nahom’s private pain became just one note in a huge, cosmic song.

"I feel it," he admitted to the night. "The pull. The hunger for something I can't name."

It has no name, Oki agreed. *It’s just how things are. To go around things. To crash. To drift. To reach out.* A softness in the stone-voice now. *You are stardust and empty space, finding your way. To live is to let your heart unfurl into its own galaxy, each beat a star, each longing a path of light across the infinite night.*

The deepest dark was turning into indigo. Oki's shape began to fade, becoming see-through like morning mist.

“We are, all of us, always wanting more,” came the final thought, huge and personal. “We are, all of us, endless.”

Then he was gone. Not with a sound, but just slowly fading, like the dawn was drinking him back into memory.

Nahom lay still. The ordinary world came back, the birds singing, the river flowing, yet everything felt changed. A curtain seemed to hang over it all, and he finally knew what glimmered beyond.

Mika snuggled against him, her warmth so real it shocked him. "Now you know," she whispered into his shoulder.

He did. He knew that love was a force of nature, not just a personal promise. That his pain was a kind of light. That ghosts were lonely and God might look like a mother. That he was, and would always be, hungry for something more.

And that this fragile, haunted morning by the water, trembling with breath and light, was the first quiet pulse of becoming whole. He listened to the

river. It sounded like laughter. It sounded like crying. It sounded like both, and neither, and the only true thing.

CHAPTER 9 – THE MEMORY OF SOULS

Ali's life felt like nothing but chores these days. Fifteen hours teaching each week – just enough to keep his name on the IRCC's grant papers. The rest of his time was spent in his car, thermal bag by his side, smelling other people's dinners on his clothes. The immigrant school was doing great. Its social media was full of perfect-looking posts: Rona and President Maley, next to maple leaf flags, shaking hands with clients whose stories were cleaned up for show. Money poured in. The charity ran with gentle efficiency, even earning a profit, as Ali offered small miracles: the correct shaping of a word, the guidance through a labyrinth of forms, each act a quiet illumination. These wins were quiet, invisible, just blended into the annual report. He was like a support beam, holding up people's lives while the bosses took all the credit.

He kept looking for Nahom, a quiet worry that stayed with him every day. Nahom just disappearing felt like something he owed. Ali checked the library, their old spot by the river, feeling like he was chasing a ghost.

When he finally saw something, it didn't quite click at first.

It was a plain downtown corner in the afternoon sun. Ali was stopped at a red light, his brain fried from going over grammar, and he looked at the crowd. A person by a trash can, holding cardboard. Homeless. Asking for help. Ali's eyes slid past, then snapped back. Something about the jawline, the height. No. It couldn't be. The light changed. A horn honked behind him. He quickly pulled his car into an alley, his heart pounding a mile a minute.

He rushed back on foot, a sick feeling building in his throat. He saw the worn-out jacket again, slowly moving against the stream of people in suits.

“Nahom!”

The person didn't turn. They flinched a little, just a slight twitch, and moved faster into the shadows of a shopping arcade.

Ali started an awkward jog. “Nahom, wait!”

He grabbed a skinny shoulder. Nahom spun around, all sharp angles and wild quickness. Up close, it was clear how much had changed. Cheekbones stuck out like rocks under tight skin. But his eyes – they weren't cloudy. They burned with a scary, sharp focus.

“Why are you following me?” Nahom's voice was like a dry riverbed, but his words were sharp. “You want a new story. For your book.” A thin, cracked smile appeared. “Writers are like vultures. You fly around, waiting for someone to stop breathing. Then you pick at the bones. Is that what I am now? Bones?”

The accusation, raw and piercing, left Ali breathless. His mouth opened, a teacher’s instinct to clarify and reassure. “I’m your friend,” he whispered, yet the words fell away, fragile as dry dust.

“Friend?” Nahom's stare was like an X-ray. “Worry is a trade. You give concern, you get a story. But my story…” He looked past Ali, at the tall glass buildings. “My story isn't a symbol. It isn't a lesson.”

He tried to pull away. Ali held on, feeling how fragile his arm bones were. All at once, Nahom stopped fighting. His body slumped. The intense light in his eyes faded, replaced by an endless emptiness. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against Ali's shoulder. A shiver, then a silent, powerful shake that seemed to threaten to break him apart.

“I live in dust from being rejected,” he whispered, the heat of his words soaking into Ali's wool shirt. “An empty space. I have no centre. Love, memories… they didn’t save me. They ate me. I’m an empty shell following a dead path.”

A bus roared past, covering up the next sob. Ali held him, a steady rock in a human storm. He felt like saying, *It'll be okay*, the kind of lie a teacher tells. He bit it back, his jaw tight.

Nahom pulled away, wiping his face with his sleeve. His expression changed, smoothing into a strange calm. “But Mika taught me what you couldn’t.”

“Who is Mika?” The name felt like a key turning in a dark lock.

A faint, real smile. “My teacher says to let your heart expand until it aches, until it becomes a star of its own, a flame born from pure longing.” He looked up at the narrow strip of sky. “She’s the quiet sky that holds me. I drift. I sleep.”

The poetry was precise, but its source was scary. “Where, Nahom? Where is this?”

“Where the city forgets. Where the river remembers.” His focus returned, sharp and pitying. “You’re still stuck in the same old loop. Time, effort, being used. You give; they take. You call it doing your part.” He tapped his own head. “I've taken myself apart. I’m just questions now. What's left after looking closely.”

He started talking, his voice finding a rhythm, like a chant, but a street preacher's loud shout interrupted him. “REPENT!” Nahom paused, blinked, as if remembering where he was.

“I study people like stars,” he continued, softer now. “Their quiet moments. The spaces between words. I fall in love with just seeing things.” A passerby bumped him; he didn't seem to notice. “I used to know holiness by heart. The rules. The right way to kneel. But feeling… feeling was always my guide. The sky called me. The world taught me how to breathe.”

He looked towards the river in the distance. “My roof is broken. The moonlight gathers me. I sleep as if I’ve been forgiven.” He turned back, and

his eyes had a quick, unsettling glow. “I’m thirsty. I wait. And in the emptiness, sometimes I see… I shine.”

Ali's hand twitched. He almost reached out, almost said, *that’s a fragment, change the verb*. The teacher in him tried to come out and then died, a small loss of who he was.

“Come with me,” Ali begged, the words finally coming out. “Please. It’s not safe. You can’t…”

“Safe?” Nahom's laugh was a short, dry crack. “Safety is the cage you built for your heart. Love is a rule, Teacher. Like gravity. “You do not ask a river to obey.” He took in a long, deliberate breath, tasting smoke and wet earth, ancient and wild. “The one cast away, the one they name a loser… he walks with the freedom of flowing water.”

He stepped back, finally breaking their contact. The space between them became huge.

“I have to go. She’s waiting.”

“Nahom—”

“Goodbye, Teacher.”

He turned and disappeared into the moving crowd, his long hair the last bit of him to vanish. Ali stood frozen. The city’s sounds poured back, brakes grinding, crosswalks chirping, a clamor both sharp and hollow that filled every corner. He walked back to his car, which was still running. The delivery app on his phone chimed – a new order. $4.75 for a 14.2km drive. He looked at the amount, then at the shiny apartments overlooking the river. Somewhere on its wild, free edges, under a sky that gathered and held, Nahom was drifting into sleep taught by whispers older than words, his heart a wild, growing star.

Ali started the car. The GPS told him the next turn. He was just a part of the system, churning through time, effort, and being used. And Nahom had turned into stardust and emptiness, following a path through endless, hungry space – a constellation of longing that only those brave enough, or broken enough, to stare into the total dark could see.

CHAPTER 10 – THE RIVERBEND OF SOULS

The world became the spot where the Bow and Elbow Rivers joined, a place Mika called Bebo's Grove. There, the two rivers met, and the city's noise faded, replaced by reeds and the old silence of rocks. The water here didn't just flow; it talked in two voices: the deep, steady sound of the Bow and the faster, lighter gush of the Elbow. They wove into a soft, steady hum over smooth stone, a language older than any maps or names.

Nahom felt it deep down. He lay on his back, the warm summer ground gently pushing through his coat. Next to him, Mika was a still shape against the dark purple of early evening, her eyes fixed on the sky.

"This place," she said, her voice fitting right into the quiet, "it's like a door. The rivers remember everything they've carried. Every rock, every prayer, every lost story." She put her hand flat on the ground between them. "My great-grandmother told me that when rivers meet, spirits do too. The land keeps them. Not as ghosts, but as… echoes in the dirt. Memory becomes part of the place here."

She sat up, hugging her knees. "Tonight's different," she went on. "The air smells like old snow and campfire smoke. The sky feels hungry. It’s a good night for the old ones to show up."

Nahom looked up with her. "Old ones?"

"Not mine," she said softly. "Or not just mine. The ones who walked this land way before any of us."

Nahom took a breath. The smell was there, under the damp earth and wild mint: a clean, icy sharpness, a hint of winter carried on a summer breeze.

"It's Kanata Night," she whispered. "The night when the line between living stone and old memories gets thin as a spider's web."

She stood, dusting dirt from her jeans, and offered him a hand. "Come on. We need to be closer to the water when it starts."

They carefully made their way down to the exact spot where the two rivers mixed. The boundary between them shimmered in the water’s subtle shift, a delicate seam holding the world together. The air grew colder, buzzing with a quiet energy. Mika knelt and touched the water’s surface, her fingers breaking the reflection of the first stars appearing.

"They say the Lights are the earth's breath," she whispered. "But sometimes, they're also its memory. And tonight… tonight the memory is strong."

As if called, the first light showed up. Not a star, but a pale, green flicker on the northern skyline. It shimmered, a bit unsure. Then another joined it, a wave of purple. Then the sky ripped open.

This wasn't just pretty postcard lights. It was alive, breathing. Ribbons of green and purple spread from the north like grand flags, making a sound like frost forming on glass. The sky trembled with pink, then gold, then a blue that pressed against the eyes. The colors rolled and pulsed, a silent tide that made the world hold its breath. The rivers below turned into a second, shimmering sky, the lights dancing on their black surface, heaven and its reflection meeting on the water.

And then, the drum.

It came from below. A deep, loud thump that shook the ground and went up Nahom’s spine. Thump. Like a heartbeat buried deep in the planet. Thump. A lighter sound joined the first, pattering like rain on stretched animal skin. Steps crunched on frozen earth, hearts pulsed together, a rhythm tangled and ancient, as if the fire that once warmed them still whispered in the cold.

Mika stood, her face glowing in unreal colours. "They're here."

In the flowing lights, shapes began to form. Not solid, only hints of form, shimmering into being. Tall figures like mountains, others slender as young trees. They moved with the lights, swimming through the streams of light, their movements a graceful, floating dance.

Light bent over the ridge and shapes flickered into being, figures walking as if on air, hunters holding spears that glimmered like starlight caught in crystal, women cradling bundles of moss that pulsed with quiet green fire. They were there and not there, woven into the fabric of the lights, moving with a slow, careful grace along the river's mirrored path in the sky.

"Don't look right at them," Mika whispered, full of respect. "See them in your side vision. The old ones are shy. They show themselves to those who know how to look without demanding."

Nahom did as she said. He relaxed his focus, and the shapes became clearer—a parade of light and shadow, silent and grand, flowing with the same sure rhythm as the water below. He felt no fear, just a vast sense of awe. This wasn't his history, not his family line, yet he was allowed to see its echo.

And they sang.

The river hummed, layered voices spilling over one another, cracking, laughing, sighing, a chorus that slid over rocks, brushed the sky, and sank into the soil.

Leader (from the lights, like a breath):
Before the fence, before the fake sky,
before our names were taken—
Elbow River, do you remember us?

Chorus (from the river itself, whispering through the reeds):
We remember.
We remember.

Nahom forgot to breathe. The air hummed with presence. He felt a pressure in his chest, a longing so huge it had no name.

The ghostly figures danced, their steps silent, but the drum in the earth answered each one. They sang of a time of belonging, of clothes made of sky, of children sung to sleep. The lights flared green with the memory of freedom. Then the drum got deeper, darker.

Leader:
Then boots came without listening.
Crosses spoke louder than children.
They said: forget.
They said: obey.

The lights turned a sick yellow-grey, the colour of old plaster and fear. The dancing shapes twisted, getting smaller, folding into themselves. Nahom no longer saw spirits, but children’s ghosts, huddled, their song a choked whimper. The drumbeat became the boring, terrible march of a scheduled day.

Mika shook next to him. A tear made a silver line down her cheek in the light. This wasn't a story from books. This was memory carved in blood, sung back from the sky.

The song went into what couldn't be said. The lights dimmed to a deep, bruised indigo, streaked with the stark white of winter bones. The chorus dissolved, and Nahom stopped breathing. The silence thickened, folding over itself, swallowing the river’s murmur, the wind, even the echo of his own pulse. He understood that silence. It was the silence that had filled his yellow room after Hermela left. A different loss, a different breaking, but the same empty feeling.

Then, a change. A single, steady voice, clear as melting ice, rose from the centre of the light stream.

Leader:
Blue Spirit, sister of my breath,
do you hear me across the water?

Chorus (warmer now, a soft gold coming back):
I hear you.
I am with you.

Red flashed, jagged and fierce, then softened into steady warmth. Green leapt and danced across the glow, alive and restless, bending the shadows around it. The figures stood up straighter. They weren't victims now, but witnesses. Survivors. Their dance became direct, a taking back.

All (a loud shout that used the wind as its sound):
Oh Elbow River, take us forward,
not as ghosts, but drum and fire!
We rise in song, we rise in truth,
the Blackfoot live. Remember our name.

The last note hung in the air, a steady hum that seemed to tune the very sound of the night. The lights began to gently fade, pulling back like a slow, content breath. The drumming softened to a single, steady beat, then into the river’s natural rhythm over stone.

From the last, lingering swirl of purple light at the river’s edge, a figure stepped forward. He was older than the stones, yet his presence felt as real as the cold now biting Nahom’s fingers. His face was like a map of time, his eyes holding the calm, deep darkness of space between stars. He looked at Mika, and his gaze felt like a hug.

Mika, the girl who lived on bad fruit and stolen magic, stood to face him. Her voice was rough with the needs of centuries, but now it cracked, breaking on the sharp edges of a friend’s obvious pain. She didn't look at

the chief, but at Nahom, lying hurt on the ground, before turning her plea back to the lights.

"Tell me,” She whispered, the lights reflected in her tears. "If love isn't a crash, then why does it break us? Why does it show up as a beautiful ghost and leave as a lasting crack? Look at my friend, Nahom. His love was a quiet gift, his whole soul laid bare for one hopeful moment. And now? He's a vase dropped from a great height, still shaped like 'us,' but just a bunch of bleeding cracks. Why must love carry such heavy pain? Why must his good heart be the target for a blow he never threw?"

Nahom, hearing his pain described so clearly, flinched as if a wound had been touched. A low sound escaped him, part sob, part giving up. He pulled his knees to his chest, his body curving around his deepest hurt. He didn't look up, but a single, heavy tear trailed through the dust on his cheek, cutting a path through the reflected glow of the spirits. Mika’s questions weren't prying; they were like a confirmation, making his private misery public, shared, and somehow more real.

The chief’s form shimmered. The chorus voices returned, soft and layered like water gently touching a bank.

“We know this pain. It’s the pain of holding onto what was, or what could never be. The vase isn't sad about the water it lost, but the purpose it was supposed to have.

Mika kept going, her own past blending with Nahom’s. "And what about the pain we get from our past? The old pain in the land, in our blood? I carry the weight of an Indigenous past that's not just a story in a book, but a living ghost in my bones. It follows me. So I ask you, who have crossed the river of life: How is life after death? Will I carry all these pains like a constant ache into whatever comes next? Or will I be free? Will the past finally… let go?"

She hugged herself, as if holding the weight of generations in her small body. The lights pulsed above, colours changing like remembered sorrows.

“That’s not love,” the souls whispered, their tone steady, low, final, answering her first outburst. “That is hunger taught by hurt. The ache of his new pain and your ancient one twisted together, a scar etched in the air, the ghost of love stolen or gone astray." Then what is it?" Mika’s voice broke. "Tell me—you who have gone beyond bodies, you who remember what was taken."

“Love isn't a crash. It's not being trapped. It doesn’t hurt to show its power.”

"But it holds us so tightly," she argued, a lifetime of surviving in her words. "Even when it ruins us."

“Chains also hold. So do graves. Being intense isn't the same as truth.”

Mika was quiet, struggling with a wisdom that felt too calm for her storm-filled heart. The chief’s gaze then held hers, and then Nahom’s, taking in both their burdens.

“To your second deep question, child who holds the long memory,” the chief said, his voice now like the rustle of autumn leaves on a grave. “Life after death isn't about carrying, but about coming apart. We don't take the constant ache. We become the field it runs across, until the runner gets tired and understands the chase itself is over. History doesn't let go of you. You let go of how much you identify with its wounds. You go from being the scar to being the skin that remembers, but no longer bleeds. Freedom isn't the lack of pain. It’s the deep understanding that the pain is a song you listened to, not the breath in your lungs.”

He turned his ageless eyes to Nahom. "And you, Salt-Water Man, you mourn a song that was never sung to you. You built a sacred place for an echo.

That's a special, lonely effort. But the builder stays, even when the sacred place turns out to be mist.”

That permission set him free. Nahom didn't talk to the chief, or to Mika. He talked to the river, to the vanished lights.

"My pain," he began, the words raw in his throat, "isn't that she left. It's that she was never really there." He looked at his hands, which had built a life for a phantom. "I fell in love with a line she never wrote. I built a home inside a word—'we'—that only ever meant 'me.' I offered my past, my way of staying alive, my hard-won calm as a bridge for her to cross… and she used it to get to a different shore."

The river seemed to listen more closely.

"The rejection," Nahom continued, a cold fire burning within him, "isn't that I was seen as not good enough. It's that I was used like money. A trade. My love wasn't a gift she refused; it was a tool she borrowed and didn't return. And now I’m left with the echo of my own strong feelings, ringing in an empty room. How do you mourn someone who never existed? How do you bury a limb that isn't there but still hurts?"

He was shouting now, his voice mixing with the river’s rush. "I’m haunted not by her being gone, but by the sheer, shocking nothingness she showed me. I built my future on her look, her smile, a few careful words… and it was all smoke. The pain is the dizziness of that discovery. The ground under you disappears, and you're left falling through the space where your certainty used to be.”

The night took in his outburst. The chief nodded slowly, a gesture of deep understanding.

“You grieve a belief,” the old one said. “A faith where you were the only believer. That is a sacred and terrible loneliness.” The chief’s form began to become see-through. “But listen: a heart that can love a dream so fiercely is

a heart of huge power. You have not lost your gift. You have brushed against its pure, radiant force, untethered, unreturned, complete in its terrible beauty. You loved an idea into being. That's what poets and gods do. Now, you must learn to use that power within yourself. To build that home for the 'me' before you build it for a 'we.' The river doesn't ask the sky for permission to flow. It simply moves, truly, toward the sea.”

The chief’s voice faded into the starlight. “You are both without a home. One from land, one from love. But home isn't a spot on a map. Home is the firm truth you carry inside you. You've touched it tonight. You've sat with the oldest memories and asked the oldest questions. You are richer in your need than kings in their scared castles.”

With a final sigh like wind through grass, he was gone. The Northern Lights had disappeared. The drum was silent.

Mika’s hand found his, her skin cool. "They aren't lost," she said, answering his unsaid thought. "They are right where they belong. We are the ones who sometimes get lost. The Lights… they remind us of the way. For everyone."

For a long time, they stood there, hands joined, as the bright ancestors had walked the sky and the rivers sang their old, flowing song below. In that moment, Nahom understood that some kinds of belonging aren't about owning land, but about being taken in by a moment—about seeing a truth so vast and quiet it changes what home means. He was a guest here, in this grove, under this sky. And to be a guest who truly sees, he realised, is its own kind of connection.

The world looked the same, yet shadows hummed differently, and every surface held the hint of something newly alive. The cold was just the cold. The ground was just the ground. But the air seemed clearer, as if cleaned by the lights.

Mika reached over and took Nahom’s hand. Her grip wasn’t a tie, not a demand. It was an anchor. A quiet sign of being there. Two survivors on a riverbank, holding the truth of their broken worlds.

They didn't speak. They watched the dawn begin to lighten the eastern sky, a practical, grey light that promised no miracles, just the next day. In the steady light, a tremor stirred within Nahom, faint and fragile, not the ending of pain but the first pulse of living alongside it. The sky left behind was just the sky. But the river, the always-present, whispering Elbow, kept flowing.

It was enough. For now, it was everything.

CHAPTER 11– THE MORNING AFTER

The cold didn’t even register. All he knew was the silence.

Nahom opened his eyes and everything seemed drained of meaning. The sky was the colour of old ashes. The Elbow River kept up its usual quiet grumble. The magic hadn’t gone away; it had been a language, and its last speaker had just died.

He turned his head.

Mika lay next to him, curled up a bit, like she was cold. Her lips were slightly open. A fine, white powder dusted her nostrils, like a cruel frost. Next to her outstretched hand lay a sliver of tinfoil, smooth and shining, a tiny, cruel mirror holding the emptiness of the blank sky. Her eyes were open, but that deep, smoky wisdom she used to have, the kind that held entire galaxies and river songs, was gone. Just snuffed out.

He saw it in her eyes, in the hollow tilt of her shoulders, in the way her hands trembled. The hunger had gnawed her from the inside, leaving only shadows where a soul had been, echoing the fractured land and twisted mind it came from. Modern Canada, with its quiet, uncaring ways, had won. It didn't need to actually kill the land’s owners. It could just sell them the poison, call it a choice, and then file the death report under “public health statistics.” The real win was in the silence.

Nahom stayed silent. A scream would have been human, and he felt far from it, like a machine flickering into stillness after its power was cut. For a long while, he didn’t move. He watched a leaf shake on a branch above her, unsure if it should fall. Then, with hands that felt like they belonged to someone else, he covered her with their blue tarp, a cover for a continent’s child. He put stones around the edges, not to keep her in, but to show that

something sacred had been there, and was now just a leftover. Then he walked away from the river bend, leaving the whispering water behind. He walked until his boots hit the road, until he found a payphone, and dialled the only number he knew.

Ali’s Camry smelled of cumin and hopelessness. He drove Nahom to New Horizon Recovery Centre in a silence heavier than any sadness. The building stood as a monument to moving on without truly facing things. Inside, they scrubbed the riverbank from his skin, the ghost of drumbeats from his ears. They labelled him with complex trauma and substance use disorder. They didn't have a label for witness to a cosmic murder.

He stayed there for months, becoming a perfect empty shell. He learned to call his pain a symptom, his longing a cognitive distortion. They dried him out, patted him down, and made him look presentable. But at night, in the sterile dorm, a single, tricky line from Mika’s lessons would pop up in the dark: *Love is seeing someone for who they are, without trying to change them.* He’d crush it like a bug in his mind. Words like that didn’t belong here. They were relics of a lost world.

He walked free at last, sober and hollow, the spark of wonder gone, and Ali led him silently back to his apartment. Nahom got a job stacking boxes in a warehouse, a ghost playing the part of living. He was like a sentence with all the poetry scratched out. He spoke only when he had to. He left no mark on anything.

Ali, meanwhile, was disappearing in a different way. That single weekly class, where metaphors had tethered him to life itself, disappeared, and the silence it left pressed like cold stone. "Things aren't lining up with our integration goals," Rona said with a fake sympathetic wince that didn't reach her eyes. His poetry, printed in journals that dozens read, was seen as a charming little quirk. His real job was the delivery app. He was a scholar

turned delivery guy, a poet whose most repeated lines were "Enjoy your meal" and "Have a nice day."

The delivery app’s chime was a thin, demanding bell. Ali, grading papers at his kitchen table, didn’t look up. "Nahom, please. 1437 14th Ave. The note says basement, alley entrance."

Nahom, a shadow on the sofa, didn’t move. "You go."

Ali sighed, a sound like rusty hinges. He almost cancelled the order. The pay was tiny, the night was cold. But habit, that big driver of survival, moved his hands. He grabbed the thermal bag and left.

The autumn evening was crisp, the air smelling of decay and distant woodsmoke. He found the address, a duplex slumping from the weight of cheap rent. The alley was a dark canyon with overflowing trash bins. The directions led to a crumbling concrete staircase going down to a basement door. A single, fly-specked bulb buzzed overhead.

He knocked. Once. Twice. A long wait. Just as he turned to leave, a lock scraped open.

The door opened a crack, then wider. A woman stood there, backlit by the weak yellow light of a single bulb inside. She held a baby against her shoulder, wrapped in a thin blanket.

"Thank you," she said, her voice soft, frayed at the edges. "I'm sorry for the trouble." She reached for the bag.

She stepped into the sickly yellow of the alley, her tired, deep-set eyes lifting to meet his. They widened. Not with the usual recognition of a customer, but with a sharp, personal surprise.

"You…," she breathed. Her English was careful, formal. "You are Ali."

He froze, the bag hanging between them. He had never seen this woman before.

"I know your face," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Nahom… he showed me. On his phone. In Asmara. He said, 'This is my teacher. This is Ali.'" Her grip on her baby tightened. "Please. Come inside. Just for one minute. Please."

Her plea was so raw, so full of a loneliness that seemed to seep from the concrete walls, that Ali, going against everything he felt, nodded. He stepped over the threshold.

The room was a small space showing their struggle. A single mattress on the floor. A hotplate. The air was thick with the smell of boiled milk, old incense, and hopelessness. It was the complete opposite of the bright, yellow room Nahom had once talked about.

She set the food down, never taking her eyes off him. "I am Hermela," she said, as if admitting a crime.

The name hit Ali hard. Hermela. The sunrise. The reason. The disaster.

"He is not with you?" she asked, her eyes searching Ali as if Nahom might be hiding in his coat.

"No."

Tears welled up in her eyes, a slow, tired leaking. "Kibrom," she said the name like a curse and a cry. "The man I came for. The teacher's son. He… he is not a good man. He wanted the papers. The status. When it was done… he left." She gestured around the damp room. "He left me with this. With her." She looked at the baby's head. "He said I was a fool to believe in love. That love is for stories. For poems." She looked straight at Ali, her gaze heartbreaking. "You are a poet. Is it true?"

Ali felt the weight of all his unwritten poems. "No," he said quietly. "It is not true. But it is what bad men say to excuse themselves."

A sob escaped her, harsh and dry. "I was the fool. I saw Nahom as a way forward. I used it. I thought I was walking towards love, but I was just running from hunger. Now I am here. And he… where is he? Is he… okay?"

Time stretched out for Ali, each memory a sharp frame: the slaughterhouse, the basement, the riverbank, the rehab centre, each echoing with its own ache. He saw the empty man on his sofa. He couldn’t lie, but he also couldn’t reveal the whole truth.

"He is alive," Ali said, choosing each word carefully, like placing stones for a path. "But the man you knew… that man was hurt. He fell into a very dark place. He is only now starting to find his way again, in a different light. He doesn't know you are here."

Hermela’s hand flew to her mouth. The guilt on her face was clear. "I want to see him. I have to… I have to say what’s in my heart. The regret. It’s eating me up."

Ali shook his head, a slow, tired movement. "It is not a good time. The wound is deep, but it is closed. To open it now… I don't know if it would bring him peace or poison." He looked at her, at the beautiful, desperate face that had played a part in his friend’s downfall. "Let me get him ready. Let me find a way to tell him you are here, and that you feel this regret. I can’t promise he will come. I can only promise I will try."

She nodded, a defeated, graceful dip of her head. "Thank you, Teacher." The title, from her lips, carried both irony and respect.

Ali left the bag of food. He didn’t take payment. He stepped back into the alley, closing the door on the sight of Hermela, alone with her child and her guilt.

He didn’t go home. He drove to the nearest part of the Elbow River, parked, and walked. The night was clear and cold, the water a black ribbon whispering of stones and time.

God is not a river, Ali thought. *God is a writer. A writer who likes sad symmetry. The lover finds the loved one only when they’ve become a ruin. The teacher of metaphors becomes a metaphor himself—a deliverer of meals, a carrier of other people's food.*

Lines from old tragedies came to mind, not as academic references, but as a small comfort:

How awful it is to see the truth when the truth only brings pain to the one who sees.

He stood at the river’s edge, the city's lights flickering on the dark water. He had to go back. He had to look at Nahom and decide: when to speak, and what to say. The first sentence would be the most important of his life. Would it be *She is here*, or *I saw her*, or *the past is not dead*?

He turned from the water, the decision a cold stone in his stomach. The writer was busy. The next page was his to write. He only knew he couldn’t write it tonight. He hovered over Nahom’s slumber, memorizing every ridge and hollow, seeking the mark where truth might unlock doors or pierce the skin.

CHAPTER 12 – THE RIVER’S ANSWER

The improvement was a quiet truce, not a win. Nahom didn't make any big announcements. He just slipped back into his life, like walking into a familiar room after being away for a long time. He took a day job at the warehouse. The sun on his walk home just felt like a fact, nothing special. He cooked, paid rent, and went for walks with Ali along the Elbow River. They talked about everyday things: work, the weather, how the light changed on the water.

He was healthy, lean like a runner. His hair, a crown of tight curls, was kept short on the sides. The shadows under his eyes were still there, but they weren't dark bruises anymore—they were the marks of someone who sees things deeply. He had the calm of an Olympian right before they make their throw.

Ali watched him come back with a mix of hope and worry. He saw Nahom smile, hum while doing dishes, and get lost in a library book for an afternoon. The empty shell of a ghost was gone. In his place was a man, whole and working, carrying his past with a new kind of strength. In those unguarded beats, staring at the river or a child’s laughter, Ali saw it: not suffering, but a deep loneliness folded into the rhythm of his being.. A part of his heart was empty forever.

This made Ali even more determined. He'd been keeping Hermela's secret for weeks, like a hot coal in his pocket. He asked subtle questions about the past, about forgiveness. Nahom's answers were careful.

"The past is like a country with closed borders," he said one evening, skipping a stone. It bounced four times before sinking. "You can look from far away, but you can't live there. The air just isn't the same."

"And the people you left there?"

Nahom was quiet, looking for another stone. "They're just part of the scenery." He said it like a simple fact.

This calm convinced Ali that he was wrong. This wasn't healing; it was like cutting something off. His love for Hermela had vanished, leaving behind a scar that shimmered like untouched skin, a hollow trace of something never truly gone. Stories had faltered, but Ali, believer in their quiet magic, began to craft an ending of his own, where the broken could breathe and the lost could return.

He planned it by the river. The Elbow had seen their lowest and highest times. Now, it would be the place for things to be fixed.

He told Nahom they were meeting a friend, a writer, for a walk. A harmless little lie.

The afternoon was perfect: late spring, everything looked golden. The air smelled of wet earth and cottonwood buds. The Elbow was high and fast with melted snow, a strong, brown rush. Nahom stood on the bank, looking at the water, relaxed. He looked, Ali thought, like a king watching his land, but with no wish to conquer it.

Then, from the path downstream, she appeared.

Hermela had dressed with heartbreaking care. A simple blue dress, a light shawl. She walked slowly; her eyes fixed on Nahom’s back. Her beauty no longer blazed like a sudden sunrise; it glowed like a spring evening, soft and steady, clear yet tinged with quiet sorrow. Hardship had carved its strength into her.

Ali watched Nahom. He saw the moment Nahom felt someone there. His shoulders tensed up just a tiny bit. He turned.

Time slowed down.

Nahom’s face showed no shock, no anger. It was a blank page. His large, dark eyes just took in her image. He looked from her face to the river and back, as if checking where he was.

Hermela took a hesitant step forward. "Nahom," she whispered.

He didn't answer. He turned back to the water, bent down, and picked up a flat, grey stone. He looked at it. Then, with a quick flick of his wrist, he sent it skimming across the surface. Plink-plink-plink-plink… sink. He picked up another. And another. Each throw was precise, yet forceful in its calm. He wasn't skipping stones. He was throwing questions into the water.

"Nahom, please," Hermela’s voice cracked. "I only came to ask for your forgiveness. From the bottom of my heart. I was blind. I used your heart like a path. I see now what I ruined."

He threw another stone. It skipped five times.

"I live with it every day," she begged, stepping closer. "The guilt is always with me. I have nothing. He left me. I'm alone with my mistake. I'm not asking for anything. Only to know that you can… that it's possible for you not to hate me."

Nahom paused, a stone heavy in his hand. He finally spoke, his voice steady and cold like icy water.

"I don't hate you. Hate would mean I still felt something for you. I feel nothing for you." He turned his head slightly, his profile sharp against the sky. "But if it will give you peace, I will say the words. I forgive you."

A shattered hope flashed in her eyes.

"On one condition," he went on, his voice dropping but still carrying perfectly. "That you never try to see me or speak to me again. That you become part of the past, like scenery. That you leave this riverbank now, and

let the current wash all of this away. My forgiveness isn't a bridge. It's a gate. And it's closing."

The words landed with the finality of a tombstone. Hermela’s hand flew to her mouth. She gazed at him, strong and unyielding, the one who had painted her yellow room with care, now dissolved into the folds of memory. Not lost. Just erased. She hadn't just broken his heart; she had completely destroyed his ability to love her. She nodded, a shaky movement, turned, and walked quickly away.

Ali stood frozen, a stunned audience to his own failed play. He had imagined tears, a dramatic fight, a big release of emotion. He hadn't imagined this icy calm. This surgical cut.

Nahom watched her go until she was out of sight. Then he simply dropped the last stone. It made a dull thud on the earth. He brushed his palms together, like someone finishing a job.

He walked to Ali, his expression blank. "Your writer friend didn't come."

"No," Ali whispered. "I'm sorry. I thought… I thought it was time."

"I know what you thought, Teacher." A faint, tired smile touched Nahom’s lips. It held no unkindness. "You thought the story needed a different ending. But my story with her isn't a chapter left open. It's a finished book. The cover is closed."

He placed a hand on Ali’s shoulder, a comforting gesture. "Let's go home."

They walked back, birdsong sounding annoyingly cheerful to Ali. His mind was racing. He had confused not having pain with having love. He had mistaken a healed wound for a sleeping seed.

What is the person writing this story doing? Ali’s thoughts screamed into the vast sky. *What kind of world creates a heart for huge love, only to have it wiped out by betrayal? Not changed—wiped out?*

He thought of the Greek tragedies he loved, where love survived the ruin, it caused. The passion was the tragedy. But this was different. A quiet tragedy. The tragedy of a love that could be completely undone.

The person writing this story, Ali realised, *wasn't a romantic. They were a brutal realist. They didn't weave love as a way to fix things; they planted it like a lightning rod. Sometimes it lit things up. Sometimes it burned them down. The scorched earth left behind wasn't a lesson, but a fact.*

Nahom walked beside him, face peaceful, watching the river keep flowing forever. He had jumped into the flow of natural life. He was swimming. He had found his freedom.

It looked like letting go completely. It looked like forgiving someone so totally that you removed them from your world entirely.

And as they reached the car, Ali got the final, unpoetic lesson from the empty sky: not how to hold onto the memory, but how to live through its complete leaving. It was a lesson in living with the quiet, huge space where a world-changing love had once been.

Where now, there was only the wind, and the steady, uncaring flow of the river, and the terrible, beautiful freedom of being finally, completely, alone.

CHAPTER 13 – THE HOPE’S KEEPER

Ali had given everything, his poems, his stories, his degrees, the languages shaped in his mouth, and all that remained was a thin residue, proof he had been here and that it no longer mattered. Nahom watched the river, felt the faint stirrings of something new, a fragile pulse that promised life alongside pain. Both stood at the edges of the same truth. One held the past, cold and real. The other held possibility, quiet and luminous. Somewhere between loss and becoming, life endured, stubborn and slow like the light of a spring evening.

Ali taught in a temporary classroom. His contract was renewed every three months, based on how many students showed up, not on the small, quiet wins he saw in their eyes. His poems had drifted from Pakistan to Canada, carrying the pulse of crowded streets, the dust of deserts, and the rhythm of monsoon skies. They were too deep for jobs and too foreign for national acclaim. His education shone like a jewel plucked from another world, admired for its glitter but powerless against a country that measured worth by its own rules. Every word he brought pressed against walls that would not bend, leaving him both present and unseen, a ghost walking in daylight, tethered to a homeland he carried only in memory.

Ali discovered that the system was a hall of mirrors gone mad, each reflection more ridiculous than the last. Deva in HR fought contracts for two fevered weeks and spent the remaining fifty basking in the legend of her own heroism, as if the world itself paused to watch. Riff, the Building Manager, guarded empty rooms as though they contained the crown jewels and obsessed over the angle of a single chair, convinced that the universe would unravel if a cleaner dared shift it. Managers multiplied like bureaucratic mushrooms, Photocopying, Digital Resources, Community

Outreach, each with assistants who whispered that their very existence kept civilization from collapsing. All of it ran on government money from IRCC, the same funds meant for the immigrants' education, now trapped in a grotesque pageant of petty rituals, absurd titles, and self-importance so thick it seemed to have mass. Ali's poems and short stories were contraband, dangerous to bring into a world obsessed with chairs, forms, and the delicate illusion of order, a kingdom where paperclips were sacred and common sense forbidden.

He saw that this money got sucked into a hidden system of just keeping things going. It paid for the shiny surveys the Outreach assistants would bring him, their questions as shallow as puddles: *On a scale of 1 to 5, how included do you feel?* It paid for the fancy year-end party at City Hall, where these same bosses, politicians, and local radio folks would pat each other on the back for their welcoming community over snacks. They'd hand out awards for great programs that only existed on paper for grant applications. The actual teachers, who planned the lessons and calmed the kids' fears, were told funding was tight. They were paid by the hour. Their dedication was just an expense to be cut.

Ali's popularity with the students had become a liability. The seats filled, the grants justified, yet the system treated his success as a complication, a glitch in its carefully choreographed theater of forms, approvals, and meaningless rituals. He showed he cared too much. He worried about their tender feelings. In the system's logic, this made him risky. His ability to inspire, to make the classroom hum with life, was now inconvenient, a quiet rebellion that threatened the delicate illusion of order the bureaucracy had built around itself. Every admiration, every small spark of trust he earned became a problem, proof that life could exist beyond the neat corridors, chairs, and forms the system so desperately worshipped.

When it was time for contract renewals, Ali was called into Deva's office during his planning period. He found her not alone. Riff, the Building

Manager, was casually perched on her desk, both of them laughing at something on her phone. The room smelled of lemon cleaner and printer ink, a tiny stage for the theater of absurdity. "Oh, Ali. One sec," Deva said without looking up. Ali stood in the doorway. No chair was offered. He waited, watching Riff nod along to her weekend story, a philosopher studying a fingernail as if the fate of the universe depended on it. A full minute passed. "I have a class in twelve minutes," he said. Deva finally looked at him, her face a strained smile. "Ali, I only have two hands and fifty teacher files. This system is a monster." She picked up one page, slid it toward him. "Your contract. Renewed for another term. We are so thankful for your loyalty." The hourly rate was two dollars less. The reason: budget changes to pay for student help programs.

Ali’s eyes traveled from the number to Riff, then to the photo on Deva’s shelf of last year’s party, her grin frozen next to a city council member. He understood. The students were the raw material. The programs, the awards, the pay for the man who stared at walls and moved chairs. Teachers who cared were a stubborn part of the factory line. His pay cut was not about saving money; it was about moving it from the engine room to the captain’s fancy dinner. He showed he cared too much. He worried about their tender feelings. In the system’s logic, this made him risky. His ability to inspire, to make the classroom hum with life, was inconvenient. He did not belong to any of them. His skin, his name, his voice, and his human kindness marked him as forever foreign. In a world obsessed with fitting everyone in, the only acceptance that mattered was the kind you could label, display at a party, and make conform. Ali remained, quiet but resolute. He showed up, graded papers, handed out food, and waited, believing that beneath all the rules, the paperwork, and the absurd theater of belonging, the Canada of big promises might still exist.

After surviving the absurd theater of offices, contracts, and endless petty rituals, Ali stepped out into the streets where winter’s dirt clung to

shrinking snowbanks. The city smelled of exhaust and cold air, a harsh reminder of rules and forms, of paper pushed and power played. Yet beneath it all, he felt a fragile thread of life, the quiet pulse of care that had not been broken by bureaucracy. It pulled him forward, toward something human, something urgent, something raw.

The call came on that thread. "Teacher," Nahom’s voice was calm, steady, carrying him away from contracts and forms. "Can we walk? By the river."

They met where the path widened, the Elbow River a dark, strong current under the dim light. Nahom looked different—not just healthy, but precise, intentional. Calmness had taken a purpose. The shadows under his eyes were no longer weakness, but the weight of careful thinking.

"I'm going back," Nahom said, looking at the water.
Ali’s heart tightened. "To Eritrea?"
"No. Not yet. I’m going to Ethiopia. I have the visa."
"But...what will you do there?"
Nahom turned. In his eyes, Ali saw the final transformation. The refugee, the butcher, the lover, the ghost, the survivor—all fused into something new: a soldier with a clear goal.

"I am going for a reason," Nahom said, his voice steady and strong in the quiet. "I was almost dead. In that basement. By this river. Then I got a new life. Not from Canada. From surviving it." He paused, choosing each word as if writing a creed. "I don’t just want a life, Teacher. I want a map. A new map. And I have drawn it."
"A new map?"

"Yes. I won’t just live for a job, or for a love that was a ghost. I will live for a land that is real. For people who are silenced." He squared his shoulders. "I am going to join the movement. For my country’s freedom. From outside. We will write. We will speak. We will remind the world." The resolve wasn't fiery, but like heat from the earth—a huge, unstoppable force from deep

inside. "We will free our home country not just from a bad leader, but from silence. That will be my life."

Ali didn't say anything. He looked at his friend and felt his own small problems shrink to nothing. He had been fighting for a spot at a table that kept moving the silverware. Nahom had decided to build a new table, in a different country, for a whole group of people.

Nahom didn't answer right away. He picked up a stone, rolled it between his fingers. He looked from Ali’s tired, firm face to the Elbow River, which moved with a quiet, steady power, making its way no matter the cold or the rocks.

"And you, Ali?" Nahom asked finally, his voice almost lost in the river’s sound. "Will you ever get your place here? Or will you be like this river—always watching from the side, holding all the pain and dirt inside, while everyone else walks dry on the banks?"
Ali looked where Nahom was looking, at the water. A long moment passed, filled only with the soft sound of the current.

"I don't trust poets who only know about life from comfy rooms," he started, his voice softer. "I've never believed words that haven't been through tough times. Life isn't about big ideas—it's about small, harsh details." He paused, watching the water get darker where it went over a hidden rock. "A river doesn't hide its pain, Nahom. It carries it. It changes it. The dirt it holds feeds the banks far away. I'm not hiding. I'm carrying. There's a difference."

Nahom thought about this, the stone now still in his hand.

"So, you choose to suffer on purpose?"

Ali smiled, not defensively, but as if that question had been with him for years.

"I choose people. And once I choose them, I don't lie to them. I don't make things seem nice when their world is falling apart. I show them what's real.

Sometimes I imagine them looking up at me and asking—'What did I do to deserve this? Why are you so mean to me?'"

Nahom looked at him then.

"And what do you tell them?"

Ali let out a slow, steady breath, his breath a pale cloud in the cold air.

"I tell them the truth. 'You did nothing wrong. Nothing at all. But I'm trying to tell a story that might live on after me. A story that could loosen something stuck inside others. And for that, I needed someone strong enough to carry the weight.'"

The river changed, darkening as the last of the sunlight broke on its surface.

Ali continued:

"That’s why I chose you. Not because you deserved the bad things—but because you could stand it. Because I trusted you. I needed you to bring love to places where it's been starved. To plant forgiveness where the ground still fights it."

Nahom’s voice softened, mixing with the water sound.

"And if the world never changes?"

Ali turned to him then, his face calm, reflected in the river's moving surface.

"Love doesn't need permission to win. It lives even when everything else goes wrong. And if the world ever learns that, it will be because of people like you—those who keep choosing it, even when it costs them everything."

Nahom looked back at the river, at its constant moving back and forth, the endless travel toward some unseen ocean.

"So that's my burden."

Ali nodded, a final, firm gesture.

"And your gift."

The wind picked up then, bringing a new kind of cold from the water. As they started walking back toward the parked car on the paved path, a shape came out of the dark under the bridge. An old man, his back bent like a question mark under a huge green garbage bag. He moved slowly, shuffling, his eyes checking the ground. As they got closer, they saw his method: he was picking up empty bottles and cans, his gnarled fingers carefully plucking a plastic water bottle from a bush. The bag, already half full, clinked softly with each step—a sad, metal song.

Ali stopped walking. Nahom stopped next to him. They watched as the man peered into a public trash bin, his whole upper body disappearing before coming out with a single beer can. He wiped it on his dirty coat and added it to his collection. This was how he earned his living. The money for a coffee, maybe a sandwich, waited at the recycling centre.

The shiny path, the neat park, the city skyline in the distance—they all framed this one man’s quiet, endless collecting of trash.

Ali’s face, usually calm and kind, seemed to harden into something older, tougher. He didn't look at Nahom. His eyes were fixed on the man, but seeing something—or some place—far beyond him. When he spoke, his voice was low, not with pity, but with a sharp, rhyming certainty. It wasn't just saying words, but almost like a chant pulled from a deep, hurting place.

'We Were Born To Clap,' he said, the title itself a sigh.

Dear First World, Salute to you
Accept humble bow, from the Third World.
*Thank you for the great lectures for fu***ing idiots.*
Heads hung low, wide-eyed,
we clapped.

The old man moved further down the path, his shadow long and thin. Ali's words followed him, each part like a stone dropped into the quiet between the three men.

You sold us your notion of humanity,
we lived in a barbaric world.
You bombed to end the atrocities.
The boisterous sound of your missiles came over our heads,
we clapped.

Nahom stood completely still. He had never heard Ali speak like this—without teaching, full of a sharp, elegant fury.

You picked some of us to live in your heaven,
I was one of those who always clapped,
now I was a proud human,
away from the dirt of the Third World,
I clapped.

A few of us declined your orders,
and ran to caves,
we saw burnt bones.
Your president called us rats,
We clapped.

Ali's gaze finally came back to the present, focusing on the old man who was now struggling with the knot on his bag. His voice dropped, the anger turning into a deep, painful sadness.
Our women heard the faint screams,
and fell to their knees crying,
their silent prayers stuck between earth and sky.
You were the people of God; we the creeping creatures,
we clapped.

I met an old man on a shiny path,
carrying a box of empty bottles.
He looked at my bottle and said, 'I sell bottles.'
There was loneliness and hunger in his eyes.
I cried.

The last word, *cried*, hung in the air, as bare and delicate as the man himself. The poem wasn't just an observation. It was a confession. It linked the bombs to the bottles, the bad leaders to the hunger in a homeless man’s eyes, the forced applause of the past to the quiet, scavenging survival of the present.

Ali was silent for a long time, watching the figure disappear into the dim light. "They call it recycling," he said finally, his voice hoarse. "We are all just recycled people here. Used, emptied, and sorted for a few cents of worth." He turned to Nahom, his eyes shining with unshed tears that mirrored the ones in the poem. "That is the story that lives longer than us. Not just mine. Ours. You carry it home with you. And I…" he looked back at the endless, shiny pathway, "I will carry it here."

The moment made Nahom’s decision clear and Ali’s choice to stay unbelievably heavy. The river, the poem, the old man—they were all part of the same unstoppable flow.

A cold wind touched their faces. Nahom reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. From behind an old photo—a picture of his mother, her face softened by time and distance—he pulled out a small, shiny rectangle: his Permanent Resident card. The maple leaf gleamed dully in the twilight. He held it between his thumb and finger, feeling its weight.

"This," he said, not to Ali, but to the river, "was a bridge. It brought me here. It kept me from drowning. But a bridge isn't a home." He looked at the card one last time, at the serious photo of a man he no longer was—a man waiting for permission. "My home isn't permission. It's a purpose."

With a soft toss, he sent the card flying into the dark current of the Elbow.

It landed with a soft plop, was carried by the flow, and vanished.

"Thank you," he said to the river, his voice thick. "For keeping me safe. For the quiet that taught me to listen. For holding her when she left. Goodbye."

It wasn't saying no to Canada, but letting go. The river, the truly constant citizen, had already given him what paperwork never could: a witness to him becoming himself.

Nahom turned to Ali and hugged him fiercely, without words. It was the hug of brothers who had gone through different hells and came out speaking the same silent language. It said everything: Thank you. I get it. Go well. Stay strong.

They let go. Nahom gave a final nod—a man already looking ahead, toward new places and fights and a life with meaning on his own terms—and turned to walk up the path.

As he reached the top of the bank, a lone goose flew low over the river, its wings beating a steady rhythm against the twilight. It honked once, a sharp, clear sound that cut through the air—not a random cry, but a definite statement. It flew right over Nahom’s head, then curved west, following the river’s path as if leading the way.

For a moment, the air seemed to shimmer with a familiar, knowing presence. Ali heard it then, not with his ears, but in the space between heartbeats—a whisper that carried the sound of Mika’s voice, woven into the wind and water:

You were the guest. Now go back to your country. May luck be with you, man who left the sky behind.

Then the moment passed. The goose disappeared into the dimming light. Nahom paused, his head tilted as if listening to an echo only he could hear.

He did not look back. He kept going, following the hidden path that had been shown to him.

Ali stood alone on the bank. The river flowed on, uncaring and endless. A story had finished—a story of escape, of cold, of lost love, of magic seen and gone, of a healing so complete it became a new kind of leaving.

But for the river, it wasn't the last story. It was just one more. A story of a man from the sea and a man who left his sky, and a teacher who stayed. The river would keep it secret from other humans, who might misunderstand or cheapen it with their labels. Instead, it would whisper it to the stones, who understood patience. Mutter it to the roots of the cottonwood trees, who understood holding on. Weave it into the sound of its own endless journey to the sea, where all stories finally mix together.

The sky above was a deep, starless black velvet. The city behind him glowed, a machine of dreams and rejections. And Ali, the unappreciated teacher, the poet and food giver, stood between them. He wasn't free in the way Nahom was free. He was still here, waiting. But as he listened to the river's endless song, he understood: some people are meant to cross bridges, and some are meant to become the banks that guide the flow. He was a keeper of stories, a witness to journeys. That, too, was a reason for being.

Nahom walked on, Hermela and Mika held quietly in his heart, toward lands that waited for his courage, while Ali turned back to the absurd, humming streets of the city, the small battles and invisible lives that were his to carry. Between them, the river flowed, composing new stories and singing the old.

They walked apart, yet the river and the sky held all they had been and all they would become.

THE END

Muhammad Nasrullah Khan is a Pakistani-born, Canada-based fiction writer and poet celebrated for his evocative short stories and novels reflecting the universality of humanity, intriguing characters, and culture. His works have appeared internationally and earned recognition such as the StorySouth Million Writers Award. Known for themes of compassion and simplicity, he

has published poetry and fiction including “Donkey-Man” and collections like Twenty Two New Asian Short Stories.

His stories explore humanity, compassion, and the natural world, often through poignant and universal narratives that transcend borders. Originally from Pakistan, he now resides in Canada, drawing inspiration from its landscapes and diverse cultures. He has also worked as an English lecturer in Saudi Arabia.